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# Fantasy and Science Fiction

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*Thomas Disch (NADA, F&SF, August 1964) is a relatively new SF writer who continues to impress with the inventiveness and quality of his work. An excellent example is the intriguing and sensitive story below, a story of romantic love—without flowers or moonlight or diapers—without, even, lovers.*

# COME TO VENUS MELANCHOLY

by Thomas M. Disch

Is THAT YOU, JOHN? DID SOMEone just come in the door? Of course, it wouldn't be John. Not after all this time. It was because I was startled I said that. If you're there, whoever you are, do you mind if I talk to you?

And if you're not there?

Then I suppose you'll mind even less.

Maybe it was just the wind. Can the wind lift a latch? Maybe the latch is broken. Though it feels all right now. Or maybe I'm hallucinating. That's what happened, you know, in the classic sense-deprivation experiments. But I guess my case is different. I guess they've rigged me up some way so that can't happen.

Or maybe—Christ, I hope not! Maybe one of those hairy caterpillar things has got inside. I really couldn't stand that—thinking of the whole house, thinking of *me,* crawling with those things. I've always hated bugs. So if you don't mind, I'll close the door.

Have you been trying to talk to



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me? I should have told you it's no use. I can't hear and I can't see. I'm broken. Do you see, there in the larger room, in each corner, about five feet from the floor, how they've been smashed? My eyes and ears. Can't they be fixed somehow? If it's only a matter of vacuum tubes and diaphrams, there should be things of that sort downstairs. I'm opening the trapdoor now—do you see? And I've turned the lights on in the storeroom.

Oh hell, what's the use?

I mean *you're* probably not there, and even if you are, *he* probably thought to smash any spare tubes that were left. He thought of everything else.

Ah, but he was so handsome, he was really so handsome. He wasn't tall. After all, the ceiling here isn't much over six feet. But he was well-proportioned. He had deep-set eyes and a low brow. Sometimes, when he was worried or puzzled, he looked positively Neanderthal.

John George Clay, that was his name. It sounds like part of a poem, doesn't it? John George Clay.

It wasn't so much his features—it was his manner. He took himself so seriously. And he was so dumb. It was that combination—the earnestness and the stupidity—that got to me. A sort of maternity syndrome I guess you'd call it. After all, I couldn't very well be his wife, could I?

Oh, when I think. . . .

Excuse me, I must be boring you. I'm sure you can't be that interested in a machine's love life. Perhaps I could read something aloud? He wasn't able to get at the microfilm library, so there's still plenty of books. When I'm by myself I don't do anything but read. It gets to seem as though the whole world was made of print. I look at it not for what's written there but as though it were a landscape. But I digress.

What do you like: poetry? novels? science textbooks? the encyclopedia? I've read all of it so many times I could puke, if you'll excuse the expression. Whoever selected those books never heard of the Twentieth Century. There's nothing later than Robert Browning and Thomas Hardy—and would you believe it?—some of *that* has been expurgated! What did they think? That Browning would corrupt my morals? Or John's? Who can understand the bureaucratic mind?

Personally, I prefer poetry. You don't get tired of it so quickly. But maybe there's something you need to know, a point of information? If you could only *talk* to me. There must be some way to fix one of the mikes, there has to. Oh, *please!*

Oh hell.

I'm sorry, but it's just that it's so hard to believe that you're

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there. It gets to seem that I only talk to hear myself speak. I wish to God I *could* hear myself speak.

Maybe I just sound like static to you. Maybe he smashed the speakers too, I wouldn't be surprised. I don't know. There's no way I can tell. But I try my best: I think each word very slowly and try to enunciate mentally. And that way the caterpillars won't be confused. Ha!

I'm really glad you've come. I've been so long without company that I'm grateful even for the illusion of it. Don't take offense: since I can't ever be sure that you're there, you can't be more than illusion for me, whether you're real or not. A paradox. I welcome you in either case. With my doors wide open.

It's been fifteen years. Fifteen years, four months, twelve days—and three hours. I've got this built-in clock connected to what used to be the nerves of my stomach. I'm never in doubt about the time. It's always right there—like a bellyache. There've been whole days when I just listen to myself tick.

I was human once, you know. A married woman, with two children and a Master's in English Lit. A lot of good that ever did. My thesis was on some letters Milton wrote when he was Cromwell's Latin Secretary. Dull? You'd better believe it. Only I'll ever know *how* dull.

And yet . . . now . . . I'd give this whole damn planet to be back there in the academic squirrel cage, spinning that beautiful, dull wheel.

Do you like Milton? I've got the Complete Works, except for the things he wrote in Latin. I could read you something, if you'd like.

I used to read things to John, but he didn't much appreciate it. He enjoyed mysteries now and then. Or he'd study an electronics text under the scanner. But poetry bored him. It was worse than that: he seemed to hate poetry.

But maybe you're not like that. How can I tell? Do you mind if I just read it aloud for my own sake. Poetry's meant to be read aloud.

*Il Penseroso.* Do you know it? It gives me goosebumps every time. Figuratively.

Are you listening caterpillars?

How did you like that?

*These pleasures, Melancholy, give,*
*And I with thee will choose to live.*

Well, it's all a lot of gas. That's what dear John called it. He called it other things too, and in each case I've come at last to agree. But such lovely gas. John couldn't see that. He was a very simple sort, was John, and blind to the beauty of almost anything except a rip-snorting sunset. And nude women. He was uncompli-

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cated. Without a sense of dialectics. He probably didn't understand half the things I said to him. If ever there was a mismatched couple, it was us.

Spacemen and pioneers, you know, are supposed to be brighter than average. And maybe John's I.Q. *was* a bit over one hundred but not by much, not by half a sigma-distance. After all, what did he need intelligence for? He was only a glorified fur-trader. He'd go out into the swamp and hunt around for the slugs the caterpillars laid there. He'd find one, maybe two, a day and keep them undernourished so they'd grow slower. Every three weeks the ship would come along, pick up the slugs, and leave supplies.

I don't know what the slugs were for. They secreted something hallucinogenic, but whether they were using it to cure psychoses or produce them, I never found out. There was a war going on then, and my theory was that it all had something to do with bacteriological warfare.

Maybe the war is still going on. But my theory—my *other* theory, I have lots of them—is that the war is over and both sides have killed each other off. Otherwise, wouldn't someone have come here for me by now?

But maybe they have—maybe that's why *you're* here! Is it?

Or maybe they don't care. Maybe I'm considered expendable.

Maybe, maybe, maybe! Oh God I could scream!

There now, I'm better again. These things pass.

Let me introduce myself. I've lost my good manners living out here alone like this. My name is Selma Meret Hoffer. Hoffer's my maiden name. I use it now that I'm divorced.

Why don't I tell you my story? It will pass the time as well as anything. There's nothing much to tell about the time I was human. I won't say I was ordinary—nobody ever believes that of themselves—but I probably didn't stand out in a crowd. In fact, I tried very hard not to. I'm the introvert type.

I was only thirty-two when I found out I had leukemia. The clinic gave me six months. The alternative was this. Of course I chose this. I thought I was lucky I could qualify. Most people don't have an alternative. Of those who do, few refuse. In a way it seemed like an afterlife. The operation was certainly a good facsimile of death.

After the surgery, they used fancy acids that attacked the body tissues selectively. Anesthetics didn't help much then. They whittled me down to the bare nerves and dumped me into this tank and sealed me in.

*Voila*—the Cyborg!

Between the sealing-in and the

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shipping off there were months and months while I was being wired up with the auxiliary memory banks and being taught to use my motor nerves again. It's quite a traumatic experience, losing your body, and the tendency is to go catatonic. What else is there to *do* after all? Naturally I don't remember much of that time.

They brought me out of it with shock treatment, and the first thing I remember was this room. It was stark and antiseptic then. I suppose it still is, but then it was starker and more antiseptic. I hated it with a passion. The walls were that insipid creamy-green that's supposed to prevent eyestrain. They must have got the furniture from a fire sale at the Bauhaus. It was all aluminum tubes and swatches of bright-colored canvas. And even so, by some miracle of design the room managed to seem cramped. It's fifteen feet square, but then it seemed no bigger than a coffin. I wanted to run right out of that room—and then I realized I couldn't: I was the room, the room was me.

I learned to talk very quickly so I could give them directions for redecorating. They argued at first. "But, Miss Hoffer," they'd say, we can't take an ounce more payload, and this furniture is Regulation." That was the name of their god, Regulation. I said if it took an act of Congress they'd redecorate, and at last I got my way. Looking back on it, I suspect the whole thing was done to keep me busy. Those first few months when you're learning to think of yourself as a machine can be pretty rife with horror. A lot of the cyborgs just go psycho—usually it's some compulsion mechanism. They just keep repeating the Star-Spangled Banner or say the rosary or some such thing. Like a machine.

They say it's not the same thing—a cybernetic organism and a machine, but what do they know about it? They're not cyborgs.

Even when I was human I was never any good at mechanical things. I could never remember which way you turned a screwdriver to put in a screw—and there I was with my motor nerves controlling a whole miniature factory of whatits and thingumabobs. My index finger powered a Mixmaster. My middle toe turned the tumblers that locked the door. My . . .

That reminds me: have I locked you in? I'm sorry, when I closed the door I locked it without thinking. You wouldn't want to go out now though. According to my stomach, it's the middle of the night. You're better off in here for the night than in a Venusian swamp, eh?

Well, that's the story of my life. When I had the reflexes of a well-trained rat, they packed me up and shipped me off to Venus at the

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cost of some few million dollars.

The very last thing I learned before leaping was how to use the microfilm scanner. I read direct from the spindle. By the time I learned how poorly the library had been stocked it was to late to complain. I'd been planted out in the swamp, and John George Clay had moved in. What did I care about the library then? I was in love.

And what do *you* care about any of this? Unless you're a cybernetic ist doing a study on malfunction. I should be good for a chapter, at least.

Excuse me, I'm probably keeping you awake. I'll let you get some sleep. I have to sleep sometimes myself, you know. Physically I can go without, but I still have a subconscious that likes to dream—

*Of forests, and enchantments dear,*
*Where more is meant than meets the ear.*

And so good-night.

Still awake?

I couldn't go to sleep myself, so I've been reading. I thought maybe you'd like to hear a poem. I'll read you *Il Penseroso.* Do you know it? It's probably the finest poem in the language. It's by John Milton. Oh dear, did I keep you up with that poem last night? Or did I only dream that I did? If I was noisy, you'll excuse me, won't you?

Now if you were John, you'd be raging mad. He didn't like to be woken up by—

*Such notes as, warbled to the string,*
*Drew iron tears down Pluto's cheek*
*And made Hell grant what Love did seek!*

Indeed he didn't. John had a strange and fixed distaste for that wonderful poem, which is probably the finest in the language. He was, I think, jealous of it. It was a part of me he could never possess, even though I was his slave in so many other ways. Or is "housekeeper" a more polite expression?

I tried to explain the more difficult parts to him, the mythology and the exotic words, but he didn't *want* to understand. He made fun of it. He had a way of saying the lines that made them seem ridiculous. Mincingly, like this:

*Come, pensive Nun, devout and pure,*
*Sober, steadfast, and demure.*

When he'd do that, I'd just ignore him. I'd recite it to myself. I think that was the best way. He'd usually leave the house then, even if it was night. He knew I worried myself sick when he was away. He did it deliberately. He had a genius for cruelty.

I suppose you're wondering if it worked both ways—whether he loved me. The question must have

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occurred to you. I've given it quite a lot of thought myself, and I've come to the conclusion that he did. The trouble was he didn't know how to express it. Our relationship was necessarily so *cerebral*, and cerebration wasn't John's *forte*.

That was the idea behind throwing us together the way they did. They couldn't very well send a man off by himself for two years. He'd go crazy. Previously they'd sent married couples, but the homicide rate was incredible. Something like 30%. It's one thing for a pioneer family to be off by itself in, say, the Yukon. It's something else here. In a social vacuum like this, sex is explosive.

You see, apart from going out for the slugs and nursing them in the shed outside, there's nothing to do. You can't build out here. Things just sort of sink into the mud unless, like me, they're built like a houseboat. You can't grow things—including children. It's a biologist's paradise, but they need hundreds of slug stations and there aren't biologists available in that quantity. Besides, all the *good* biologists are in Venusburg, where there's research facilities. The problem then is to find the minimum number of personnel that can man a station for two years of idleness without exploding. The solution is one man and one cyborg.

Though not, as you can see, an infallible solution. I tried to kill him, you know. It was a silly thing to do. I regret it now.

But I'd rather not talk about it, if you don't mind.

You've been here two days now —fancy that!

Excuse me for keeping to myself so long, but I had a sudden, acute attack of self-consciousness, and the only cure for that is solitude. I invoke Milton's lovely Melancholy, and then everything is better. The beasts quiet down. Eurydice is set free again. Hell freezes over. Ha!

But that's a lot of nonsense. Let's not talk always about me. Let's talk about *you*. Who are you? What are you like? How long will you be staying here on Venus? Two days we've been together and still I know nothing about you.

Shall I tell you what I imagine you to be like? You're tall—though I hope not so tall as to find that low room uncomfortable—with laughing blue eyes and a deep spaceman's tan. You're strong yet gentle, gay yet basically serious. You're getting rather hungry.

And everywhere you go you leave little green slugs behind you that look like runny lime Jell-O.

Oh hell, excuse me. I'm always saying excuse me. I'm sick of it. I'm sick of half-truths and reticences.

Does that frighten you? Do you want out already? Don't go now—

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I've just *begun* to fight. Listen to the whole story, and then—maybe—I'll unlock the door.

By the way, in case you are getting hungry there may still be some rations left down in the storeroom. I don't want it to be said that I'm lacking in hospitality. I'll open the trapdoor and turn on the light, but you'll have to look for them yourself. Of course, you're worried that I'll lock you in down there. Well, I can't promise that I won't. After all, how do I know you're *not* John? Can your prove it? You can't even prove you exist!

I'll leave the trapdoor open in case you should change your mind.

For my next number I'd like to do *Il Penseroso* by John Milton. Quiet down, caterpillars, and listen. It's the finest poem in the language.

How about that? Makes you want to go right out and join a Trappist monastery, doesn't it? That's what John once said.

I'll say one thing for John: he never tattled. He could have had me taken away and turned to scrap. All he had to do was give the word when the ship came down to pick up the slugs, but when there was company he could always put a good face on things. He was a gentleman in every sense of the word.

How did it happen then—if he was a gentleman and I was a lady? Whose fault was it? Good God, I've asked myself that question a hundred times. It was both our faults and neither's. It was the fault of the situation.

I can't remember now which of us was the first to start talking about sex. We talked about everything that first year, and sex is very much a part of everything. What harm could there be in it, after all, with me sealed in a steel tank? And how could we *avoid* the subject? He'd mention an old girlfriend or tell a slightly shady joke, and I'd be reminded of something by degrees. . . .

The thing is that there's an immense curiosity between the sexes that almost never is satisfied. Things that men never know about women, and *vice versa*. Even between a man and a wife, there is a gulf of unmentionables. Maybe especially between a man and a wife. But between John and me there seemed to be nothing to prevent perfect candor. What possible harm could it do?

Then . . . the next thing. . . . I don't remember which of us started that either. We should have known better. The borderline between perfect candor and erotic fantasy is no wider than an adjective. But it happened imperceptibly, and before we knew quite what we were doing, it had been done. It was already a habit.

When I realized exactly what we were doing, of course, I laid

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down the law. It was an unhealthy situation, it had to stop. At first John was agreeable. He was embarrassed, like a little boy who's been found out in some naughtiness. We told each other it was over and done with.

But it had become, as I've said, a habit. I have a rather more vivid imagination than John and he had grown dependent on me. He asked for new stories, and I refused. He got angry then and wouldn't speak to me, and finally I gave in. I was in love with him, you see, in my own ectoplasmic way, and this was all I could do to show it.

Every day he wanted a new story. It's hard to make the same tired old tale seem new in every telling. Scheherazade was supposed to have stood up for a thousand and one nights, but after only thirty I was wearing thin. Under the strain I sort of retreated into myself.

I read poetry, lots of poetry, but mostly Milton. Milton has a very calming effect on me—like a miltown, if you'll excuse the pun.

The pun—that's what did it. It was the last turn of the screw, a simple pun.

It seems that when I read, I sometimes read aloud without realizing it. That's what John has told me. It was all right during the day when he was off in the swamp, and when he was here in the evening we'd talk with each other. But he needed more sleep than I did, and when I was left on my own, after he'd gone to bed, I'd read. There was nothing else to do. Usually I'd read some long Victorian novel, but at the time I'm speaking of, I mostly read *Il Penseroso.*

He *shouldn't* have made fun of it. I guess he didn't realize how important it had become to me. It was like a pool of pure water in which I could wash away the grime of each day. Or else he was angry for being woken up.

Do you remember the part, right near the beginning, where it says:

*"But hail, thou goddess sage and holy,*
*Hail, divinest Melancholy"?*

Of course you do. You probably know the whole thing as well as I do by now. Well, when John heard that he broke out laughing, a nasty laugh, and I, well, I couldn't really stand that, could I? I mean Milton means so *much* to me, and the thing was that he began to sing this *song.* This awful song. Oh, it was a clever idea, I suppose, when first he thought of it, but the combination of that vulgar tune and his perversion of Milton's noble words—though he claims that's how he understood the words when I first read them to him, and I still maintain that the second *i* in divinest is pronounced like a long *e*—it was aggravating in the extreme, I can't tell you how much it upset me.

Do I *have* to repeat them?

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*Come to Venus, Melancholy Baby.*

*Cuddle up and don't be shy.*

And so on. It's not only a bad pun —it's a misquotation as well. It should be *Hail*, not *Come*. So vulgar. It gives me goosebumps even now.

I told him to leave the house right that minute. I told him not to come back till he was ready to apologize. I was so angry I forgot it was the middle of the night. As soon as he was out the door, I was ashamed of myself.

He came back in five minutes. He apologized outside the door, and I let him in. He had the large polyetheline bag over his shoulder that he uses to gather up the slugs, but I was so relieved I didn't think anything of it.

He put them on the visual receptors. There must have been twenty, all told, and each one was about a foot long. They fought each other to get right on the lens because it was slightly warmer there. There were twenty of them, foul, gelatinous slugs, crawling on my *eyes*, oh God! I shut off my eyes and I shut off my ears, because he was singing that song again, and I locked the doors and I left him like that for five days while I recited *Il Penseroso*.

But whenever I came to that one line, I could never say it.

It was perhaps the hallucinogens, though he might just as well have done it in his right mind. He had every reason to. But I prefer to think it was the hallucinogens. He had been all that time with nothing else to eat. I've never been five days without food, so I don't know how desperate that would make one.

In any case, when I came to myself again and opened my eyes I found I had no eyes to open. He'd smashed every receptor in the room, even the little mobile attachment for cleaning. The strange thing was how little I cared. It seemed hardly to matter at all.

I opened the door for five minutes so he could get out. Then I closed it so no more caterpillars could get in. But unlocked. That way John was free to come back.

But he never did.

The supply ship was due in two days later, and I guess John must have spent that time in the shed where he kept the slugs. He must have been alive, otherwise the pilot of the supply ship would have come in the door to look for him. And nobody ever came in the door again.

Unless you did.

They just left me here, deaf and blind and half-immortal, in the middle of the Venusian swamp. If only I could starve to death—or wear out—or rust—or really go insane. But I'm too well made for that. You'd think after all the money they spent on me, they'd

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want to salvage what they could, wouldn't you?

I have a deal to make with you. I'll let you out the door, if you'll do something for me. Fair enough?

Down in the storeroom there are explosives. They're so safe a child could use them. John did, after all. If I remember rightly, they're on the third shelf down on the west wall—little black boxes with DANGER written on them in red. You pull out the little pin and set the timing mechanism for anything from five minutes to an hour. It's just like an alarm clock.

Once they're set, just leave them in the storeroom. They'll be nearer to me down there. I'm over the storeroom. Then run like hell. Five minutes should be time enough, shouldn't it? I'll only want to read a bit of *Il Penseroso.*

Is it a deal? The trapdoor is open, and I'm opening the outside door now just to show you I'm in earnest.

While you set to work, I think I'll read something to pass the time.

Hello? I'm waiting. Is everything all right? Are you still there? Or were you ever there? Oh please, *please*—I want to explode. That would be so wonderful. Please, I *beg* of you!

I'm still waiting.

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# BOOKS

YOU READ THIS IN OCTOBER, BUT I write it in July. The books are mostly June, July, and August publications, and I suppose this is what they mean by "summer reading." The surprising thing is not how readable the current batch of novels is, but how serious the bulk of this "light reading" turns out to be.

I rush to clarify. *Serious* is not a word to bandy lightly. I am not talking about the publishers' kind of "serious," interchangeable with "prestige;" nor the critics' "serious," which is somewhere between "worthy" and "impressive;" nor the casual reader's "serious," roughly synonymous with "dull." I have in mind the writer's meaning: "important"—to the writer.

I suppose all the shadings actually relate to "message" or theme. When a writer has something to say that is important (to him), he is serious about the writing of it. The critic takes it seriously if the writer manages to impress him with the worth of the statement. What yardstick the publishers use to measure the merit of any man's message, I have no notion—some occult equation, perhaps, combining in mystical quantities the critical, commercial, and cocktail party-clairvoyants' assessments of a given writer in a given year? But I am quite sure about the casual reader's meaning: when the message obtrudes to the point of obscuring the action, the book is too serious.

It is the writer's kind of "serious" I am using here. Every one of the eight novels stacked in front of me is at least technically "light fiction;" they are action stories, adventures, thrillers. Yet all of them are vehicles for thematic statements and/or ethical explorations of utmost seriousness. One might almost entertain the hope that writers (in s-f, at least) are giving new consideration to the quaint old notion that the best way to instruct is to entertain. And if seven out of eight do not *quite* bring off the double effort—well, perhaps that is *why* they are "summer books;" and none fail entirely; and besides, there is only one John D. MacDonald.

The MacDonald entry* is not

*THE GIRL, THE GOLD WATCH, & EVERYTHING, John D. MacDonald, Gold Medal, 40¢, 207 pp.



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actually one of this summer's crop, but a reissue of THE GIRL, THE GOLD WATCH, & EVERYTHING, which somehow missed being reviewed here when it first appeared. I am, frankly, pleased that the chance now falls to me: the opportunity to discuss MacDonald in an s-f column is all too rare.

The first MacDonald story I remember reading was "A Child is Crying." (If you missed it, try THE SHAPE OF THINGS, ed. Damon Knight, Paperback Library.) Since then I have read everything of his I've seen: short stories and perhaps thirty or forty novels: mysteries, suspense, sex thrillers, satires, and, infrequently, fantasy and science fiction. I have never read a bad one; and though I recall only one book that had the trappings of the officially-serious novel I cannot recall more than two or three that seemed to me to have been *written* unseriously.

TGTGW&E is the first full-length MacDonald s-f since THE PLANET OF THE DREAMERS, but he is not only one of the best s-f writers when he does it—he *thinks* like one no matter what he's writing.

MacDonald's characters do not live in the never-never land of most popular fiction. They inhabit the familiar world of machinery and motels, political upheavals and realty scandals, syndicates and supermarkets, conventions and court orders, automobile accidents, road repairs, floods and storms and fires and swamps, urban renewals and rural electrifications. They not only inhabit this world; they live with it: their problems come out of it and they must cope with it somehow to find their solutions. Inevitably, the characters themselves are genuinely contemporary, with mores and morals and methods recognizably similar to yours and mine and the people's next door.

I do not for a moment intend to say that MacDonald is a "realist" of the camera variety, painstakingly, painfully, recording the ordinariness of the ordinary. On the contrary: he is a storyteller in the grand style, a singer of bright romances, bold adventures, deep tragedies, and high humor. He selects the unusual and colorful to write about—but the selection is made from the richness of choice offered by the complexity and excitement of the world we live in. His heroes are almost always muscular and competent, his heroines beautiful and loving—but the masculine competence is technical as well as physiological, and feminine tenderness expresses itself as generously in bed as in the kitchen. He writes fastmoving yarns about situations charged with conflict and suspense—but behind it all is an informed and thoughtful comprehension of

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the forces (natural, technological, political, economic) actually at work in our society, out of which the drama emerges.

And just every now and then, he also writes a gleefully balloon-busting, pomposity-pricking farce. TGTGW&E is one of these —to start with. (The Miami Scene, with settings straight out of musical extravaganza; beaches and bikinis, yachts and motels, conventioneers and arty-parties; *plus* the slinkiest villainess since Caniff stopped doing the Dragon Lady, the sturdiest secretary since Winnie Winkle got married, and the bounciest hillbilly since Daisy Mae.) It is also a solid science-fantasy, with some fine detail-work attached to the Gold Watch Gimmick. And (like it says in the title) it has at least a touch of just about *everything* MacDonald does best: cops-and-robbers, shipboard stuff, financial intrigue, slugfests, suspense-and-pursuit, and several varieties of plain and fancy sex.

Did I mention that under the antics this is a *serious* book?

Unfortunately, there *is* only one MacDonald—though I might make Poul Anderson a much closer second, if I could take the presumably serious part more seriously. THE STAR FOX* is the book version of the Gunnar Heim stories originally published here ("Marque and Reprisal," "Arsenal Port," and "Admiralty"): a fastmoving futurehistorical full of song, drink, blood, brawn, and lofty-minded piracy in the high spaces, with even a little bit of sex thrown in this time. If you overlook what may have been intended as Serious Political Significance (the roaring blood of the Vikings physically and morally triumphant over the mealymouthed conformist e-t-lovin' peacemongers), and what appears to have been set forth as serious economic and tactical theory (the advantages of private enterprise in space-faring, and of privateering in space warfare), it's the usual ripsnortingly readable Anderson adventure, complete with a multilingual spaceswinging minstrel, and a lovely interstellar lady spy.

As for Gunnar himself—if only Errol Flynn were still alive!

And while I'm being nostalgic, what ever happened to Poul Anderson—I mean that *other* Poul Anderson: the man who wrote, for instance, "Sam Hall?"

Not up to the same level of good fast summer reading, but short, unpretentious, and adequate, is THE BALLAD OF BETA-2*—a space-mystery in which an anthropology student of

*THE STAR FOX, Poul Anderson, Doubleday, $4.50, 274 pp.
*THE BALLAD OF BETA-2, Samuel R. Delany, and ALPHA YES, TERRA NO!, Emil Petaja; Ace double, 45¢, 96 pp. & 156 pp.

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the far future unravels the meaning of a ballad sung by the descendants of the degenerated survivors of an early "Universe"-type starflight. If the protagonist had a touch of Gunnar Heim's arrogant charm (or any other kind) in place of his scholarly smugness; or if the style were less noticeably (or more successfully) reminiscent of Cordwainer Smith's distinctive technique, the whole thing would have come off better. As it is, the basic idea is good enough to carry you through the novella length.

ALPHA YES, TERRA NO!,* on the flip side, is a considerably more ambitious effort, in several ways. Its most successful effect is the characterization of the emissary from Alpha to Earth, a complex, credible and likeable extraterrestrial who unfortunately turns out *not* to be the hero after all. The major device of the novel, equally unfortunately, is the familiar Galactic Council hearing, at which the alternatives of destruction or membership for Terra are considered, and decided, on the testimony of a short handful of earthmen. This situation has defeated some fine authors in the past; Petaja contrives to make the whole thing even weaker than usual by using as Terra's representatives a group of earthers with some admixture of Alphan blood, and then having his friendly Alphan stage-manage their whole show for them.

In spite of all this, the book holds up tolerably well; Petaja sets his scenes vividly and convincingly—and if his philosophical points tend to be sentimental, his emotional convictions are strongly communicated.

How much the book may have gained for me by being read in close conjunction with three other new novels, each of which attemps a somewhat similar ethical exploration, I'm not sure; certainly, all four books gained interest by contrast and comparison.

I suppose there must be some profound socio-literary significance involved when four separate writers of rather different backgrounds (and with four different publishers) all turn at the same time to the same kind of Stapledonian universe-survey to examine metaphysical-and-ethical questions. But there is another multiple coincidence I found even more intriguing: the return, as it were, of the Lone Space-ranger.

Whether through inner motivation or external pressure, the protagonist in each of these books either makes, takes, takes over, or breaks into, a previously unavailable means of swift travel through space-time; then, either alone or with a tiny group of handpicked companions (*not* a crew, *not* an expeditionary force), ventures

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into the unknown for personal reasons which become subordinated to the urgencies of ethical problems arising out of contact with varied alien races.

(Was it just a month or so ago I was complaining about the lack of proper heroes? Well, it is true that some of this month's batch have heroism rather thrust upon them—but they *accept* it. All these, and Gunnar Heim too!)

Lloyd Biggle*, like Petaja, makes use of a comparatively conventional s-f format: the Mysterious Machine from Somewhere—in this case, Somewhen. His hero is an air-force engineer type who seizes semi-control of the strange sphere, involving himself in voyages through time *and* space that result in a sort of reversal of the Galactic Trial problem: Major Karvel has to decide how to apply his own ethics to civilizations with vastly different values.

Although the past and future folk all come off a bit Flash Gordonish, and most of the 20th Century types carry a faint taint of cardboard too, Biggle has created a warmly believable character in the bitter, capable, one-legged Major. He has also taken thoughtful care in both the setting and the solutions of his ethical problems, and — *hallelluja!* — has worked out some of neatest time-travel *non*-paradoxes I have come across.

Neither FURY nor ALPHA has the richness of texture or complexity of theme to be found in Moudy's NO MAN ON EARTH* or Davidson's MASTERS OF THE MAZE*; and if neither of these manage to bring off quite-successful resolutions, it is probably because of the major proportions of the problems they try to explore.

Mr. Davidson is not only very well known to readers of this magazine, but probably the most widely published of the four authors; Walter Moudy is a Kansas City attorney whose novel, so far as I know, constitutes his debut as a writer of fiction.

Like Petaja, Moudy makes use of a human-e-t crossbreed as hero —but this time the device provides credibility for both the super-capabilities and the motivations that enable Thad Stone, single-handed, to invent, finance, build, and operate his own starship at a time in the fairly near future when solar space travel is a going thing, but faster-than-light is no closer to terrestrial technology than it is today.

The most successful parts of the book are those concerned with Thad's development and the beginnings of his urgent search for

*THE FURY OUT OF TIME, Lloyd Biggle, Jr., Doubleday, $4.50, 257 pp.
*NO MAN ON EARTH, Walter Moudy, Berkley, 50¢, 176 pp.
*MASTERS OF THE MAZE, Avram Davidson, Pyramid, 50¢, 158 pp.

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his alien father. I *believed* Moudy's 21st Century Kansas City, and I came about as close as I *do* come, to believing in his young superman—for a while. This was a considerable accomplishment, because I had first to overcome the complete lack of conviction of the overdone opening, describing young Thad's birth on a reservation (maintained by callous sociologists to study primitive hill people), and his survival despite his rumored "man-witch" paternity. And then I'm afraid I lost not only credence, but most of my interest, when the search for daddy became by degrees a search for a civilization to satisfy super-Thad. Too many planet-stops with too many superficially created civilizations, perhaps? Or a loss of emotional identification with the maturing superman? I don't know—and it is perhaps unfair to make such comparisons with a first novel, but it may be counted as high credit to the book that I consider the contrasts—but I still remember the impact of such a tour in Stapledon's STARMAKER; and I never lost touch with Robin in Sturgeon's MATURITY.

Certainly an encouraging first offering—rather more rewarding than either ALPHA or FURY, and in many ways as successful as Davidson's book.

As for Davidson, he goes far to redeem himself for the travesty of MUTINY IN SPACE (*F&SF Books*, June). (This time, you see, he was *serious*.)

His device is a mystical-metaphysical Maze, accessible (from our world) through entry-points known to, and guarded by, certain selected members of an ultra-secret esoteric order of freemasons; the Maze shortcircuits space-time in some way, so that it provides passageway between an infinite variety of universes and probabilities.

In lesser hands, such a construct could easily have been an amalgam of all that's worst in Lovecraft and *Weird Tales*. Davidson's incredible ear for dialogue, his sharp eye for detail, and his resulting deft touch with a wide range of characterizations, (the explorer-writer hero; the very Victorian elderly gentleman; the New England Sheriff; fascist-minded Major Flint; Darius Chauncey, soldier and ardent snake-worshipper; Arrettagorretta, of the Chulpex; Et-dir-Mor of Red Fish Land; and *lots* more) turn the Maze into a curse-and-convenience adjacent to the most matter-of-fact realities. And for three quarters of the book, while the scene is being set, and Nate Gordon is making his first accidental and fumbling, then eager and questing, journeys through the Maze, the quality of the adventure is almost Carrollian in feeling.

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And then the whole thing falls apart (as Moudy's did), from the point where the ineffable Masters of the Maze are introduced, and Nate starts dashing through flashing vistas of strange worlds, seeking Ultimates which seem to be far over his head, and perhaps the author's too.

I do not think Davidson can be faulted for failing to accomplish what he essayed here; but one might say mildly that a writer of his experience should possibly have known better than to attempt a Definition of Truth in a short action novel.

The same accusation can be leveled, I suspect, at "Harry Kressing." I do not know what literary experience lies behind this pseudonym, but from the quality of the writing in THE COOK*, I assume there is more than enough to justify my complaint. This is a beautifully underkeyed, suspenseful, double-level story of (maybe) Satan at work in two quiet households—but Kressing does no more to clarify his definition of Ultimate Evil than Davidson did for Ultimate Good.

Two other new novels should be mentioned briefly:

NIGHT SLAVES* is another double-level effort, considerably less successful. Are there really extra-terrestrials in Eldrid? Or is Clay Howard living in a World of Fantasy? (Besides which, the psychiatrist is in love with Howard's wife.)

THE MAIN EXPERIMENT* has some of everything: psionics, the British-establishment-research-outfit (*a la* Hoyle and Pincher and Snow), a mad scientist, weird-supernatural events, a love affair, lots of Somerset local color, a Lord and his Beautiful Daughter—all told in the genteel-languid tones of the typical British county mystery.

And there are some reprints and reissues:

TOMORROW AND TOMORROW, **Hunt Collins**, Pyramid, 50¢, 190 pp. "Vikes" (Vicarions) vs. "Rees" (Realists) in drug-happy sex-spreeful lobby-lousy future society.

THE PILGRIM PROJECT, **Hank Searles**, Crest, 60¢, 224 pp. (F&SF *Books*, December, 1964)

FIFTH PLANET, **Fred Hoyle** and **Geoffrey Hoyle**, Crest, 50¢, 192 pp. (F&SF *Books*, March, 1964)

MAROONED, **Martin Caidin**, Bantam, 75¢, 301 pp. plus appendices. (F&SF *Books*, October, 1964)

—JUDITH MERRIL

*THE COOK, Harry Kressing, Random House, $4.95, 244 pp.
*NIGHT SLAVES, Jerry Sohl, Gold Medal, 50¢, 174 pp.
*THE MAIN EXPERIMENT, Christopher Hodder-Williams, Putnam, $4.95, 250 pp.

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# THE PEACOCK KING

## by Larry McCombs and Ted White

THE FIRST SENSATION WAS LIKE the initial nausea they'd known with the LSD. It was the nausea of total special disorientation, and worse. Before he'd lost touch with his body, Eric had felt it fragmenting, wrenched into disintegration. Then his last consciousness of the controls, the ship—and even his physical self—was gone, and there was no longer time nor space, but only their still-linked awareness of each other's spirits, freed into a void between motion and fixity.

Karen's touch was an emotional caress to which he readily responded. Their link, carefully built and fostered over the long months before, transcended the cleavage from physical reality that had come from the hyperspace jump.

They were *free!* Once again, their consciousnesses expanded out into the universe, this time with even greater exultation.

"We've been here before!" Was that Karen's thought or his own? He felt emotionally entwined with her; his thoughts were her thoughts. No matter whose, that thought voiced their mutual elation.

"Tao," was the reply.

There was no longer any boundary between their inner selves and the Outside, no boundary between them. All was Tao, all was now. Briefly they'd known this before, the uncrippling of release from the stunted senses of their bodies, the



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blossoming perception of *wholeness*. Now they experienced it to a far greater extent, feeling themselves unfolding, outward . . .

Then, suddenly, they were not. They were hanging in space, their skin-suited bodies joined by bare hands, pivoting on a common axis amid the empty stars. Eric had only just enough shocked awareness to hold his breath.

*Where was the ship? Where was the Peacock?*

Eric rolled over lazily and stretched. The auto-clock had gradually raised the lights in the room and wafted a fresh breeze across the sleeping floor to gently wake them. With a soft grin at the figure next to him, still stubbornly curled into a hedgehog curl, he waved a hand at the wall panel controlling the infrared lamps in the ceiling. As the cozy warmth died away, he ran a tender hand along Karen's bare back and tweaked her ear.

"Wake up, Porkypine. It's our big day."

With a great show of reluctance, Karen slowly rolled over and stretched out, rubbing and arching her back against the resiliant plastic-covered foam floor like a friendly feline. Noting with pleasure Eric's continually fresh delight in the sight of her body, Karen wiggled provocatively. "Always interested in business, are you?"

"No time for that this morning," he replied decisively, digging a commanding finger into her navel. "Up and at 'em!" Suiting his actions to the words, he sprang limberly to his feet and made a mock grab for her hair.

"Okay, boss, okay. I'm coming."

Eric palmed a door open and stepped into the bathroom. While the walls sprayed him with alternating soapy and clear water, he washed his face and scalp clean of stubble with a depilitory cloth.

While blasts of hot air dried him, he felt his crown. "I still haven't gotten used to this bald head," he complained as he emerged into the bedroom again, where Karen had folded down the wall to cover the sleeping pad and reveal closets and drawers.

She took one wincing glance at her own reflection in a large vanity mirror, and turned to the bath. "Don't believe that stuff they give you about convenience for attaching the control electrodes," she said at the door. "It's just to keep us faithful to each other—no one else would take a second look at us! Romantically, anyhow!"

By the time Karen had emerged from the bathroom, Eric had slipped into the one-piece suit that fit him like a second skin. He remembered wryly the many almost embarrassing sessions of measurements and fittings that had gone into the making of the suit. Looking down his front, he

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announced in mock doubt, "I still feel like I ought to wear a pair of pants over this thing."

"What's the matter? Ashamed of it?" Karen wriggled her way into her own suit.

"No, but just don't make any provocative gestures in that thing before we're strapped in, or I may be embarrassed on nationwide television."

"It'll give the columnists something new to write about," Karen tossed back over her shoulder as she palmed another door and walked through it.

Eric followed her into the living room, where a breakfast sat steaming fragrantly on the low Japanese table. While Karen busied herself with the tea, he carefully chose a scroll from a rack hidden in a wall panel. He carefully unrolled it until it hung its full silken length against the rear wall of a tall recess opposite the breakfast table.

*"For today, a special blessing from the Peacock King.* The silk hanging depicted in faded subtle colors a six-armed figure seated upon the back of a peacock, whose many-eyed tail spread out as a background to the resplendent king. The scroll was an eleventh century Buddhist painting, and they'd fallen in love with it during one of their tours through Japan. No amount of money could persuade the monks of the Ninnaji temple to part with it, but with some reluctance they had finally agreed to loan it to these peculiar Americans who seemed so well to understand the beauty and meaning of the treasure.

As he seated himself cross-legged on the mat before the table, Eric brought his palms together in imitation of two of the king's hands and bowed to the scroll. "May the *Peacock* live up to its billing," he intoned, only half seriously.

Buddhist legend had it that the Peacock King removed the evil thoughts and passions from the minds of humans, while his peacock devoured the poisonous snakes, insects and plants in his path. The government had initially resisted their desire to name the ship the Peacock, but had finally given in to what some higher officials regarded as sheer friviolity.

Meantime Karen had taken the three perfect jonquils which lay on the breakfast tray and carefully arranged them in a jet black vase before the scroll. Their delicate fragrance blended with that of the tea.

They ate in silence, slowly savoring the good food, eyes and minds fixed upon the ominous and yet benevolent face before them. When they had finished, and swallowed one last ceremonious cup of tea, they rose and bowed towards the scroll, and then passed through a door which had thoughtfully slit open at their gesture.

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The apartment which they were now leaving was cleverly designed to simulate the open grace of a Japanese pavilion. While its walls were not actually sliding screens, and indeed were loaded with automatic machinery, the basic design and decoration had skilfully suggested fresh air and sunshine lurking in the corners. This effect they'd contributed to with their own choice of furniture and hangings.

But there were no windows.

And this for a simple reason: the apartment was located in a vast government complex buried deep underground. Now that they had deserted the apartment, this fact was obvious. No pretense had been made with the long steel-grey corridor which stretched austerely before them. Their padded footsteps scraped loud echoes from the featureless walls.

They had taken perhaps twenty steps down the corridor when Eric suddenly stopped, snapping his fingers. "We almost forgot to consult the oracle."

"Not thinking of backing out now, are you?" Karen taunted lightly, but she followed him back into the apartment.

From another concealed shelf in the living room Eric removed a well-worn pair of black volumes and a handful of thin sticks. While Karen sat silently watching, Eric began casting the yarrow stalks.

It was a complex ritual, containing within it the rhythm and beauty of a dance. One could find justification enough in the action of the ritual itself, but at the end of each section of the dance, he made a mark on a piece of paper with a brush pen, until at last he had twelve symbols arranged in a pattern.

For a time he silently studied the pattern. Then he turned to the book. For a longer time he studied the pages related to the diagram he'd drawn. Finally he spoke softly, with a puzzled note to his voice.

"The symbol is Ming I, 'Intelligence Wounded.' 'The good and intelligent officer goes forth in the service of his country, notwithstanding the occupancy of the throne by a weak and unsympathising sovereign. In the circumstances it will be wise to realize the difficulty of the position and maintain firm correctness.' "

"It seems clear enough to me," Karen suggested. "The government still insists that we must claim any habitable planets for the United States and take whatever measures might be necessary to keep them from the knowledge of the Communist Bloc or the Chinese. We must 'maintain firm correctness'—do whatever seems right to us in the circumstances."

"Yes," Eric replied, "but I have two moving lines, in the second and sixth places. 'He is wounded

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in the left thigh. He saves himself by the strength of a swift horse. He is fortunate.' But in the sixth line, 'There is no light, only obscurity. He had at first ascended to the top of the sky. His future shall be to go into the earth.' "

For a few moments they pondered the reading in silence. Eric shrugged, and then a quiet bell-tone sounded. "We're late," he commented needlessly, and then quickly but respectfully replaced the *I Ching* and the yarrow stalks in their cabinet.

The corridor took them to an elevator, and when that disgorged them they were met by others, who escorted them, hand in hand, into the briefing room where a handful of reporters and a barrage of cameras and microphones waited for them. The air was faintly blue and stale; the refreshers were unable to cope with the concentration of nervously smoked cigarettes.

As they entered, the pool announcer was speaking suavely into the microphones, following an outline being held for him on cue cards by a grip behind the cameras.

". . . as you all know, culminates over a year of training and preparation for this trip. The *Peacock* represents the fifth in the experimental class of faster-than-light ships and is a last-ditch attempt to conquer the problems of interstellar flight. All four of the previous hyperspace ships are presumed lost, and the project would've been abandoned, had not Captain Arbogast of the *Lucifer II* managed to radio back a report on their transition to normal space just outside the orbit of Pluto. He reported that not only had the jump created a period of temporary insanity—analysis indicates extreme schizophrenia—but that his crewmate was missing. He then took the *Lucifer II* on the long jump to Alpha Centauri, never to regain contact with us or return. Since one more ship was ready, a radically new training program was instituted. Eric Bowman and Karen Hamblin, who are with us here now, have been thoroughly trained in all possible techniques of interpersonal communication, until they are able to function almost as a single person, and . . ."

A slight pressure from Karen's hand told Eric she was thinking the same thing. On the monitor screens behind the glittering lenses of the cameras and to one side he could see their images. Only their heads and shoulders showed; linked hands were discreetly ignored. As the announcer droned on, his mind wandered back over the preparation so briefly recapped . . .

They had originally been chosen among a thousand others in a test of intuitive abilities administered at colleges, universities and schools across the country. Eric

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had been a graduate student at Harvard, pursuing a course in the philosophy of science and delving into the interrelationships between oriental philosophy and modern physical science. He had taken the tests for the fun of it, and had almost laughed it all off when he was informed he'd been chosen for further testing.

Karen had been living with a jazz musician in Chicago and had heard about the tests at the University of Chicago, where she occasionally modeled for art classes. She'd taken the tests on a whim, having always suspected her intuition was more reliable than most, and on another strange whim, much to the disgust of her boyfriend, had decided to go to California for the further tests and training.

Eric and Karen had met soon after arrival, and had instantly been attracted to each other. The project was isolated in the high Sierras, almost ten miles beyond the end of the nearest paved road, and conducted in greatest secrecy. The secrecy was not so much due to any fear of sabotage or spying, but rather fear of public opinion and pressure, were news about the activities there to leak out. For, much to the dismay of the government authorities, the project had been put in the charge of a rather far-out philosopher who had written many books on the adaptation of Eastern mystic philosophies to the Western mind. While there was general higher echelon approval of Dr. Tompkins' goals, there were many misgivings about his methods. Basically what was desired was a piloting team who could function together as a fully autonomous unit, and maintain their sanity when exposed to the mind-wrenching schizophrenia apparently experienced in hyperspace.

Little was known about hyperspace. Popularly it was referred to as a translation from one level of reality to another. One of its immediately obvious uses became apparent when it was discovered that in returning to normal space one could return to a different sector of it. The new reality of hyperspace bore a remarkable resemblance, Dr. Tompkins decided, to descriptions in some Buddhistic writings of Nirvana. His decision was to crash-train his candidates to accept, at least temporarily, such a state.

After a few months of basic tutoring in Taoism, Zen, and—on their own, Tantrik Buddhism—Karen and Eric found themselves achieving a certain serenity and control over their own mental processes. And, because they had become lovers, they had found a closeness accented by their practice of *maithuna*, the yoga of love—reaching that rare state of love where they moved in complete awareness of each other. Mean-

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time, the original thousand had been inconspicuously weeded down to about fifty of those who showed the most promise.

Along with the disciplines of Buddhism, drugs were also used. First, Eric and Karen took part in a group of fifteen who chewed the root bark of the Africantabernanthe iboga. This was one of the lesser known of the psychedelics, the so-called consciousness-expanding drugs.

The drug produced several hours of euphoric halucinations, in which they took great delight. At first they watched, fascinated, as they became aware of familiar objects in new detail and marvelously glowing colors. There was a great deal of easy laughter among the fifteen, and Eric and Karen found themselves drawn into a deep affirmation of each other which rose and peaked upon the waves of their delight.

After the heady sensations had worn off, there followed almost twenty-four hours of sleeplessness during which time they found their brains highly sharpened. It was unlike the stimulation of such drugs as dexadrine; there was no nervousness or excitation. It was simply as though all the mental fog which normally obscures thought had been blown away and replaced by brilliantly illuminating sunshine. During this period they devoted themselves to the final digesting of all they had learned earlier. It would be impossible, Eric knew, to ever lose it now: the products of their momentary brilliance would always be with them.

When Dr. Tompkins felt that they had been adequately prepared, he brought the last six survivors of the course together to take lysergic acid diethylamide, popularly known as LSD-25. This drug, the most potent of the psychedelics by far, could be used, when taken in a comparatively large doseage, to simulate schizophrenia. It was to be the final test.

The eight hours they spent together under that drug were a time that Eric and Karen would never forget. At first it went as before, a tingling euphoria bringing with it halucinatory powers. But while before they had felt some vestige of personal control, this time they did not. Eric felt himself slipping over a vast precipiece, and knew he was powerless to halt himself.

The renewed colors seemed not quite so sharp this time, perhaps because they had each retained a little more sense of awareness after their previous psychedelic experience. But then they began to find themselves able to make things melt and change form before their eyes, simply by willing it—or even by suggestion from another. For some minutes (that might have been hours or seconds) they stared at each other. Eric was possessed by the knowledge that

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he had only to look into Karen's eyes to plumb the depths of her soul: all would be known to him. As he stared at her, and she at him, they saw a succession of demons and angels, age and youth, good and evil forms sliding across their faces. For a moment, Eric's heart froze, as he saw on Karen's face the ugly vision of Evil Incarnate, then she shifted her position, the shadows changed, and it was gone, to be replaced by a look of loving acceptance.

At first they'd stayed with the others, participating in part in the group gestalt, finding ecstacies of meaning in the paintings and music. But as each of the six fell deeper into the experience, there was less communication between them and the others.

Eric had a vision then, of an unparted, fourth-dimensional figure of himself stretching back through adolescense, childhood, and early infancy to birth. *He had always been alone,* he realized. Man is born alone. Now each of them was experiencing this aloneness, each had withdrawn into himself.

But he was not lonely. As he grappled with this, he became aware of Karen again, aware of the depth of being which they shared. He found himself growing absorbed in her—and found her returning his response. Soon they quietly left the group to return to their room.

There they lost all consciousness of time or space, but became simply two spirits floating in a great sea of sensations—colors, sounds, feelings, smells, all heightened to a new and marvelous beauty. In the midst of *maithuna* lovemaking, they suddenly lost all awareness of having come from two bodies. Their heightened rapture seemed to transcend the physical, and there was between them only one great spirit occupying the entire room, even the entire universe. Eric was conscious of a wisp of thought, whose he did not know: "When this is all over, I wonder if we'll ever get sorted out into our own bodies again?"

They didn't. At first the somewhat uncomfortable insights into their own mental processes that the drug had given them left them with what Dr. Tompkins assured them was a common sort of psychological hangover: for some days they were rather touchy and jumpy, their thoughts bound up in the problem of integrating all the new things they had learned about themselves.

But this initial period of reorientation passed, and they found a new awareness of each other. Most of their conversations were constantly being punctuated with the phrase, "I know." They found much less need for talking then—a simple look into each others' eyes could convey more than

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an hour's talking. Whether making love, or quietly strolling through the stunted sage under the close high clouds, they were startled to find that each could feel both the physical and emotional sensations in the other. If LSD was supposed to simulate conditions in hyperspace, they could hardly see why the concern; this was a new sort of heaven—not a hell of insanity.

"I never knew that schizophrenia was supposed to be like *that*," Karen confessed, puzzled, to Dr. Tompkins.

"For you, apparently it wasn't a schizophrenic condition at all," replied Tompkins. "At least, not as we clinically define it. You found higher realities, while classically the schizophrenic condition represents a withdrawal from reality, or at least a retreat into a personal sort of reality which hasn't much in common with external reality.

"The difference seems to be in the way you approached the experience, the way in which you two had prepared yourselves emotionally."

"I understand one of the others had a bad time of it," said Eric.

"Yes, Reynolds. He had what we call 'the horrors.' When he got in deep enough he couldn't take it, he couldn't take the loneliness. Every man is an island—you know that now. We are each unique beings, born alone, living alone, dying alone. In one sense we will never cease being alone. This makes many lonely. There's a difference . . ."

"Yes," they chorused, and then looked at each other and laughed.

"The experience you went through strips away all the defenses. Most of us have sought to hide our aloneness from ourselves. Many simply can't face it. You did, and you transcended it. You accepted it, you affirmed it. You used it as a starting point, a jumping off place.

"I don't think you'll have any trouble with the jump—and I've selected you to make it."

They had been so wrapped up in exploring their new mutual personality that they were almost startled at Tompkins' reminder of the project's ulterior purpose. They gazed into each others' eyes, hands tightly clasped, probing their emotions and intuition. Then Eric laughed delightedly. "Yes," he said, "we *will* go."

That had been just the beginning. They were given every opportunity to develop their growing love, living now in the apartment buried deep in the government complex, but the major part of this second phase of the project was a rigorous training program, spending so many hours in the mockup of the space ship cabin that it became—as intended—practically an extension of their bodies.

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They were to pilot a unique kind of ship, for it could travel everywhere simply by translation into hyperspace. It had no need for rockets, no need to fly. But at the same time, it had to be equipped for space conditions, since their first jump would be a preliminary one to the edge of the solar system, and from there the big jump, across stars. Once in the Alpha Centauri system, they would have to hedgehop, looking each planet over before making any landings. And, once landed, they would not disembark, but would return immediately, directly to Earth. Computors would have carefully recorded and compilated the data from each of their jumps, carefully tracking their path. They would be able to backtrack automatically to any point they'd already touched upon; it was only the path ahead which needed to be picked out.

Once they'd recorded the way, it could be followed, automatically, in one direct jump, from Earth. Future trips would be closer to the old ideal of teleportation than space travel, and could be accomplished automatically. But for the initial exploration a great deal more was needed.

The controls would not be operated by their hands—although some auxiliary systems could be—but rather by direct mental impulse, transmitted through a maze of fine electrodes fitted to their shaven heads with a cybernetic helmet. By removing the gap in muscular reaction time in this fashion, a far more positive control could be assured.

During one of their brief vacations they had asked for the chance to travel to Japan for a visit to some of the temples and monasteries of the Buddhist religion, for they now considered themselves to represent a new synthesis of Buddhism. Its complex, yet simple rituals seemed to bring the mind to just that state of calmness needed for their mental unity. The government had acceeded to the trip, after successfully arranging to conceal it as a public relations tour.

Now they were ready to board the *Peacock* for the trip that might bring mankind to the stars, or might end their lives within the next hour. The announcer beside them finished his speech with a smooth transition to the pair: ". . . and so mankind's dreams of stellar travel ride today with this fine young couple who are standing here at my side. How do you feel today, Eric and Karen?"

They looked at each other, tried to suppress a grin and failed, and then Karen said to the announcer, "We'll go."

He was somewhat startled, but managed a well-modulated appreciative chuckle. "Well, I'm sure everyone is relieved to hear that. Do you anticipate any trouble?"

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This time Eric answered quickly. "Well, as a matter of fact, yes. We might get killed."

This was beyond the announcer's experience, and after an insistent signal from his director off camera, he brought the interview to an end. "Well, Karen and Eric, the best wishes of the whole world ride with you today. We'll be praying for you."

Eric answered, suddenly serious. "We thank you," he said, nodding. Then he reached for Karen's hand just as she extended it, and they walked through the newsmen and were followed by their anonymous government escorts down another corridor.

The ship was nestled in the center of the great underground complex, a large sphere, the entrance port of which seemed simply another door at the end of the corridor. They clambered into the small control capsule, and for the next few minutes were completely engaged in the details of attaching the control helmets to their graphite-smeared heads, the sensors which monitored their physical reactions for ground control, and reading and checking over the instruments before them. The capsule did not smell quite as the mockup had; otherwise Eric could tell no difference. Eric reached out and met Karen's hand, and their fingers locked. Tests had borne out their insistence that physical touch was necessary for the optimum functioning of their mental-empathetic contact.

As the last minutes were counted off Eric reached over for a last hasty kiss, and they become so involved that they were only recalled to reality by the overhead speaker which insisted, "*Peacock* Control, signify ready!"

"Ready and willing," Karen snapped back with mock efficiency, and then with a laugh they settled into place.

The vacuum pumps outside the hull were rapidly fading in their monotonous throb as the air between the ship and the walls of the pocket it nested in was exhausted. The vacuum was necessary; otherwise their departure would create a sizeable implosion. It would be maintained until their return, for the same reasons.

As the last seconds ticked away, Eric and Karen found themselves fully alert, every sense tensed to the slightest reaction of the ship. They did not glance at each other, yet knew each others' feelings and fears completely.

"God bless you. Four. Three, Two. One. Jump," came the voice from Ground Control, and with the last word came a sudden wrench which threw the *Peacock* into hyperspace.

Something had thrown them back out again; something had precipitated them into normal space before it had been time.

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Naked of the ship, they would die in minutes. Eric felt a cold tingling in his eyes, then noticed Karen's were shut. Quickly he closed his own.

That was better. *That's better,* he thought. Or was that his thought?

He felt a hand-squeeze. *Mine.*

With his eyes closed, swinging in complete weightlessness, holding even his lungs motionless, he could feel the same special disorientation stealing over him again. His lungs seemed ready to burst, and he panicked. He exhaled with a shudder, and convulsively grabbed Karen's hand with crushing force. They were in space! *Alone, alone, alone.*

He would never again know such true aloneness. In his mind's eye he still saw the cold unwinking stars wheeling about them. He was falling!—and there was no bottom!

Was this to be their fate, to perish alone and insignificant among the empty stars? Was this the meaning of the prophesy from the *I Ching*?

*No.* He felt Karen's reassuring grip. She squeezed, gently. *'His future shall be to go into the earth.'* Believe, Eric, *believe.*

*There is a way,* Karen tried to show him, pulling him, leading him. *Let yourself go free.*

Then he understood. Deliberately, he recalled into his mind the disciplines, carefully he began to relax himself, loose himself from the panicking fear. Slowly, he began to disassociate himself from physical sensation.

As a boy he'd sometimes laid upon a bed as motionless as possible. He used to call it "floating." After a time it would seem as though he was indeed floating; he'd no longer be able to feel his body, no longer even be able to tell the position of his limbs. He would spin in that narrow void until finally he became frightened and convulsively started, opened his eyes, and reasserted himself in the world of sensation.

It was like that now. They had to get out, out of physical reality —back into that otherwhen of hyperreality. Disassociation: that was the key. While he let himself spin out of his body, he tried to recall, to recreate the way they had done it before, with the LSD, and he let his spirit grope outwards, linking with Karen's, knowing and understanding—elsewards.

Their two bodies hung, dust motes in the vast starscape, for a long moment. Then they were gone.

There was no sensation of time. As soon as they'd reestablished that transcendent contact, time ceased for them and they floated in an unbracketed infinity. For Eric it was also a period of insight and understanding; now he *knew.*

There was never any way of tell-

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ing how long they'd hung together out there in space—much later the medicos told them that it could have been only a matter of a few seconds, but for Eric those had been long seconds indeed, even after he'd cut himself off from his body with its screaming lungs and frostbitten skin. And if they'd been, even for only a moment, alive in normal space, it had been for a finite amount of time, while afterwards, in non-space—call it *hyperspace,* another dimension, or nowhere—there was only infinity . . .

Then they, and the ship, were through, the jump completed. Eric was aware again of the touch of the electrodes clamped to his aching skull, his numbed feet and hands, his ringing ears and bleeding nose, and—most of all—the rasping breath shuddering up into his body.

He opened bloodshot eyes and stared into Karen's. Then they were laughing together.

"You're the Lost Weekend personified," she said.

"Hey, we did it!" he said at the same time. Then he reached overhead for the small gray mike, and pulled it down, the cord tense against its return spring, and repeated his words, this time for Earth.

His arm ached while he held the mike and waited. Finally the small speaker behind them spat twice and then crackled, "Congratulations on making the first leg. How was it?"

"A little bigger than we expected," Eric said, and exchanged a knowing grin with Karen.

They were still waiting for the reply to that one when, shifting his weight, Eric suddenly felt a sharp pain over the mass of lesser aches and pains in his left leg. There was a smooth furrow cutting a shallow groove through suit and skin. Blood still oozed into the gap.

After a moment of surprise, he realized the only possible explanation. "I must've been grazed by a tiny meteor or something while we were—out there," he told Karen. A cool chill blew through his mind as he momentarily recalled the vast majesty of the lost and fearfully empty space in which they'd hung. He shuddered. Then he was secure and confident again, nested in his awareness of Karen and the control capsule.

Karen looked startled, and then quoted softly: " 'He is wounded in the left thigh. He saves himself by the strength of a swift horse. He is fortunate.' "

For Eric a laugh came quickly with his release of breath. "And the rest of it, then. It's not ominous at all. 'There is no light, only obscurity.' That was hyperspace. And, 'He had at first ascended to the top of the sky. His future shall be to go into the earth.' I think that augers well for our safe return."

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Karen paused, then said, "I wish I understood why that happened to us—I mean, our getting thrown back out into normal space like that. But at least now we know what happened to the other man who disappeared."

"There seems to be a lot more to the jump than just a matter of mechanics," Eric said, musing. "Once human beings are involved, an act of will seems to be involved. Hyperspace isn't another physical place; it's sort of like a state of mind—and our minds can apparently interreact with it. Our mistake seems to have been in assuming that because we'd experienced something similar with drugs that we could expect the same sort of thing. We must not have handled it just right—because hyperspace is *not* an LSD experience, and once in it it appears we do have some measure of control over it. The others—who knows? Apparently the experience was beyond their capabilities. Some went crazy, others got half-way through, as we did, and came out too soon, without their ships. But we—"

Karen nodded. "We pulled ourselves through, we went from normal space back into hyperspace *by ourselves*. An 'act of will' . . . Do you suppose—?"

"It's possible. I seemed to understand about that, after we went back in. It felt as though I was regaining something . . . some past knowledge. I felt a *familiarity*. I don't think we'll have any more trouble with our jumps, and—who knows? Perhaps in time, with experience, we won't need the ship at all."

"Teleportation—?" Karen's eyes glistened.

Then the radio sputtered again and Ground Control asked, "Are you two sure you're ready? Everything ready for the big jump?"

"More than ready," Eric replied. And, maintaining firmness and correctness, mankind reached for the stars.

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## COMING NEXT MONTH

### CUGEL THE CLEVER — by JACK VANCE

The five novelets which make up CUGEL THE CLEVER are something quite special. To those who remember Jack Vance's THE DYING EARTH, these novelets, in the same setting, will be a long-awaited feast. To all, a fascinating reading experience is in view. Next month, the first in the series: THE OVERWORLD.

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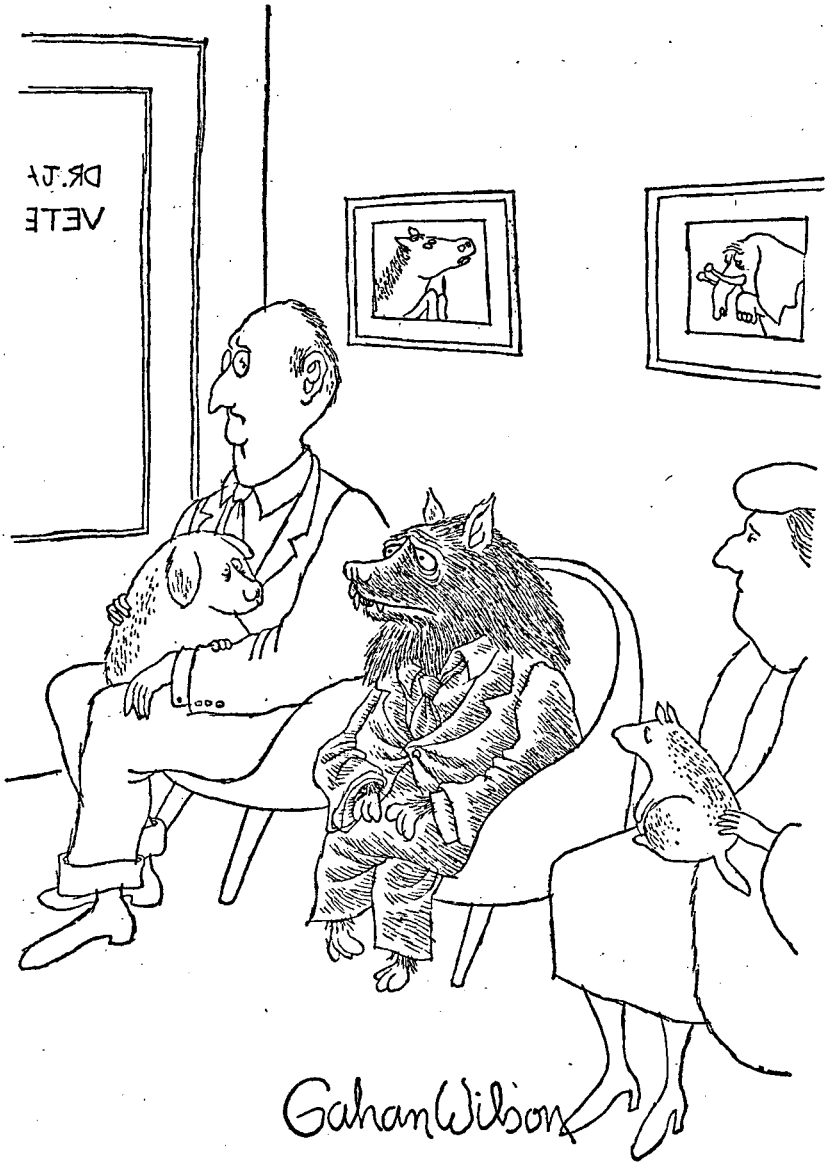




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## *INSECT ATTRACTANT*

*by Theodore L. Thomas*

THERE HAS BEEN INCREASING criticism of the use of chemical poisons to kill insects. The poisons do a good job, but they may also kill birds, fish, and other animals, to say nothing of people. Yet insects kill millions of people every year. Some insects transmit diseases. Others infect and destroy food crops. So we are in a dilemma. Insects must be eliminated, but they must be eliminated safely.

Research has shown that the females of many species of insects use a scent to attract the males. It turns out that the sex attractant is an extremely potent chemical compound. The male of the cockroach will come arunning when exposed to as little as 30 molecules of the scent produced by the female. In order to identify this chemical, the chemists collected cockroaches in a jar, and blew clean air through the jar. By freezing out the contents of the air, they were able to obtain 12.2 milligrams of the attractant and identify it. It took the chemists nine months and 10,000 female cockroaches, but they did it. It is now possible to lure male cockroaches to their death. There's a potent weapon here. But insects aren't the only ones. Higher animals also use scent to attract their mates.

Well, now. Is it possible that we have been overlooking the real reason why a man marries a certain woman? Perhaps the chemist can give the answer. Here prowls a female of the species *Homo sapiens,* producing a chemical attractant peculiar to her genetic heritage. Along comes the one receptive male able to detect that particular attractant even through a cloud of Chanel No. 5. Mating must follow. Suppose later the female stops producing the attractant, or suppose it wasn't exactly the right one after all, and the male then finds another female with the right one. There would have to be a change of mates, no help for it. If this is the way things really are, a new kind of marriage counselor could evolve to cope with the situation. He would be an organic chemist, skilled at analysis and synthesis.



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*Here is the second and final part of Roger Zelazny's novel of a far-future Earth. (No harm done if you missed the first part; see synopsis by the author.) The setting here is a mysterious and extraordinary tour of radioactive Greece—where the sights mostly have large teeth and an unfriendly nature, and the tour party itself is something less than homogeneous. It all adds up to some truly jarring encounters and a surprising ending.*

# . . . AND CALL ME CONRAD

## by Roger Zelazny

### (Conclusion)

SYNOPSIS:

I was minding my own business, like any good creature of darkness, when the call came through from Port-au-Prince. I was to conduct a tour: Me, Conrad Nomikos, Commissioner of the Earthoffice Department of Arts, Monuments and Archives. How mortifying! I am a high-level goof-off, a Commissioner—and Commissioners just don't do things like that. . . .

Not unless circumstances tend to be somewhat extraordinary, that is.

So I left my Cassandra—my mermaid, my bride of two months—there on the isle of Kos, and I returned me to Haiti. There did I meet with Cort Myshtigo, who was somewhat blue and Vegan, being from the world of Taler.

Cort wanted to write a book, about the Earth, about what we had left here after the Three Days. That's not much, but he wanted to see it, all, and he'd named me as the guide he wanted running the show.

So okay. He was the scion of the



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wealthy Shtigo-gens—he could call the shots.

In Haiti did I renew my acquaintance with such notables as George Emmet—Earth's chief biologist and Director of the Earthoffice Department of Wildlife Conservation—and his fickle wife, Ellen; and with Donald Dos Santos and his consort, Diane of the Red Wig, the moving forces in the Radpol; and Phil Graber, Earth's poet laureate; and last but never least, Hasan the Assassin, Earth's last mercenary.

Lorel Sands, the Earthdirector, had said, "Go thou and conduct this tour." So that was it.

Ere we left, however, I catered to a whim of the Vegan's and took him to a voodoo ceremony. There did Hasan distinguish himself by throwing a fit and murdering nonexistent people. Oh, mal! I took this as an indication that he had been hired to kill someone in the near future, and that he was acting it out while under the influence of whatever the hell he was smoking those days—even though Mama Julie maintained that he was possessed of Angelsou, the deathgod.

The Nile Valley was our first stop, and there did I go mad when the earthquake came and sank Kos beneath the wine-dark Aegaean—Kos, and my Cassandra. . . .

I fought with anything in sight when this happened, until finally Hasan sicced the robot-golem on me. I smashed it, and the battle brought back my wits; but it had tried to kill me, and golems are supposed to have governors which prevent them from harming people. Therefore, it seemed that someone had sabotaged it, so that it could polish me off.

Hasan, of course. But why?

Who could want me dead? I'm a nice guy, and—well . . .

Just because a couple people, like Phil, Hasan, and maybe Red Wig knew I was a few centuries old and had once been known as Karaghiosis the killer, founder of the Radpol Returnist Party, why should my life be in jeopardy now? But someone seemed to wish me gone.

Naturally, I decided to find out why.

I was also faced with the task of preserving the Vegan's life during this time—for it appeared that Diane was the real moving spirit behind the Party, and she'd gotten Don to hire Hasan to get Myshtigo dead.

Why, again?

Well, once before had the Vegans tried to move in on us—to buy up Earth property, to set up their dark, satanic resorts on our world and to exploit our people. That was when Karaghiosis the killer had bombed their resorts and smashed the Earthgov Realty Office on Madagascar, which had been selling them the land.

See, I am one of the descendents of the survivors of the Three Days. There were Earth colonists on Mars and Titan when that brief war occurred, and they never came back—not till much later, anyhow, and then

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not to stay, just to administer. They developed an interstellar drive after they considered the Earth a dead issue. They went out to the stars, they found an ancient and cultured people—the Vegans—and they obtained umbrage among them, working as registered aliens in the Vegan Combine. Also, they constituted the Earthgov in absentia. They had a majority, and they began administering the Earth via a big civil service office, after they discovered that there was still something down here to administer to.

The Radpol and I disapproved when the resort business started. We stalemated them half a century ago—no new Veggy resorts, no new Radpol violence—and since then I've been marking time, playing like dead.

The real aim of the Radpol was not resistance, but Return. We had wanted the appropriate Earthfolk to come back to help us rebuild the home world. They didn't, though. They just left us with an Office designed to administer to our humble needs and preserve the cultural heritage of the race. Ha! The mainland had been bombed all to hell. We were an island culture, because nobody had bombed islands. The Office actually administers only to the islands; those unfortunates who live about the mainland Hot Places suffer the Office and derive few benefits from it. (They hate the Office too, of course, which makes the whole thing even more difficult, should the Office ever really try to help.)

So, here I am, protecting a Vegan until I can find out what he's up to. Also, I'm protecting me. It's a big job. Before leaving Egypt for Greece, I was involved in a small altercation with a boadile, which is a mutant croc (I don't care what George calls them), while keeping Myshtigo alive. Then Diane asked me to help kill Myshtigo, on the basis of an obscure Radpol communique. Diane fascinates me, but the Veggy's death could boomerang. We can't strike till we know what he's up to, I say. It just might be something good, for once. We don't really know.

So I've got a lot of people mad at me, and I can't get away from the feeling that either Hasan the Assassin or I will have to go before this thing is settled—and he's tough.

---

IT. DOWN BELOW.

Death, heat, mud-streaked tides, new shorelines . . .

Vulcanism on Chios, Samos, Ikaria, Naxos . . .

Halicarnassos bitten away . . .

The western end of Kos visible again, but so what?

. . . Death, heat, mud-streaked tides. New shorelines . . .

I had brought my whole convoy out of its way in order to check the scene. Myshtigo took notes.

Lorel had said, "Continue on with the tour. Damage to property

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has not been too severe because the Mediterranean was mostly full of junkstuff. Personal injuries were either fatal or are already being taken care of. —So continue on."

I skimmed in low over what remained of Kos—the westward tail of the island. It was a wild, volcanic country, and there were fresh craters, fuming ones, amidst the new, bright, sealaces that crissed and crossed over the land. The ancient capital of Astypalaia had once stood there. Thucydides tells us it had been destroyed by a powerful earthquake. He should have seen this one. My northern city of Kos had then been inhabited from 366 B.C. Now all was gone but the wet and the hot. There were no survivors—and the plane tree of Hippocrates and the mosque of the Loggia and the castle of the Knights of Rhodes, and the fountains, and my cottage, and my wife—swept by what tides or caught in what sea-pits, I do not know—had gone the ways of dead Theocritus—he who had done his best to immortalize the place so many years before. Gone. Away. Far . . . Immortal and dead to me. Further east, a few peaks of that high mountain range which had interrupted the northern coastal plain were still poking themselves up out of the water. There was the mighty peak of Dhikaios, or Christ the Just, which had overlooked the villages of the northern slopes. Now it was a tiny islet, and no one had made it up to the top in time.

"You lived there," said Myshtigo.

I nodded.

"You were born in the village of Makrynitsa though, in the hills of Thessaly?"

"Yes."

". . . But you made your home there?"

"For a little while."

" 'Home' is a universal concept," said the Vegan. "I appreciate it."

"Thanks."

I continued to stare downward, feeling sad, bad, mad, and then nothing.

Athens after absence returns to me with a sudden familiarity which always refreshes, often renews, sometimes incites. Phil once read me some lines by one of the last great Greek poets, George Seferis, maintaining that he had referred to my Greece when he said, ". . . A country that is no longer our own country, nor yours either"—because of the Vegans. When I pointed out that there were no Vegans available during Seferis' lifetime, Phil retorted that poetry exists independent of time and space and that it means whatever it means to the reader. While I have never believed that a literary license is also good for time-travel, I had other reasons

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for disagreeing, for not reading it as a general statement.

It *is* our country. The Goths, the Huns, the Bulgars, the Serbs, the Franks, the Turks, and lately the Vegans have never made it go away from us. People, I have outlived. Athens and I have changed together, somewhat. Mainland Greece though, is mainland Greece, and it does not change for me. Try taking it away, whatever you are, and my klephtes will stalk the hills, like the chthonic avengers of old. You will pass, but the hills of Greece will remain, will be unchanged, with the smell of goat thigh-bones burning, with a mingling of blood and wine, a taste of sweetened almonds, a cold wind by night, and skies as blue-bright as the eyes of a god by day. Touch them, if you dare.

That is why I am refreshed whenever I return, because now that I am a man with many years behind me, I feel this way about the entire Earth. That is why I fought, and why I killed and bombed, and why I tried every legal trick in the book too, to stop the Vegans from buying up the Earth, plot by plot, from the absentia government, there on Taler. That is why I pushed my way, under another new name, into the big civil service machine that runs this planet—and why Arts, Monuments and Archives, in particular. There, I could fight to preserve what still remined, while I waited for the next development.

The Radpol vendetta had frightened the expatriates as well as the Vegans. They did not realize that the descendents of those who had lived through the Three Days would not willingly relinquish their best areas of coastline for Vegan resorts, nor yield up their sons and daughters to work in those resorts; nor would they guide the Vegans through the ruins of their cities, indicating points of interest for their amusement. That is why the Office is mainly a foreign service post for most of its staff.

We had sent out the call of return to those descendents of the Martian and Titanian colonies, and there had been no return. They had grown soft out there, soft from leeching on a culture which had had a headstart on ours. They lost their identity. They abandoned us.

Yet, they were the Earthgov, *de jure*, legally elected by the absent majority—and maybe *de facto* too, if it ever came to that. Probably so. I hoped it wouldn't come to that.

For over half a century there had been a stalemate. No new Veggy resorts, no new Radpol violence. No Return either. Soon there would be a new development. It was in the air—if Myshtigo was really surveying.

So I came back to Athens on a bleak day, during a cold, drizzling rainfall, an Athens rocked and re-

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arranged by the recent upheavals of Earth, and there was a question in my head and bruises on my body, but I was refreshed. The National Museum still stood there between Tossitsa and Vasileos Irakliou, the Acropolis was even more ruined than I remembered, and the Garden Altar Inn—formerly the old Royal Palace—there at the northwest corner of the National Gardens, across from Syndagma Square, had been shaken but was standing and open for business, despite.

We entered, we checked in.

As Commissioner of Arts, Monuments and Archives (mainly though, I feel, because I was the only Greek in the party), I received special considerations.

I got The Suite. Number 19.

It wasn't exactly the way I'd left it. It was clean and neat.

The little metal plate on the door said:

*This suite was the headquarters of Konstantin Karaghiosis during the founding of the Radpol and much of the Returnist Rebellion.*

Inside, there was a plaque on the bedstead which read:

*Konstantin Karaghiosis slept in this bed.*

In the long, narrow front room I spotted one on the far wall. It said:

*The stain on this wall was caused by a bottle of beverage, hurled across the room by Konstantin Karaghiosis, in celebration of the bombing of Madagascar.*

Believe that, if you want to.

*Konstantin Karaghiosis sat in this chair,* insisted another.

I was really afraid to go into the bathroom.

Later that night, as I walked the wet and rubble-strewn pavements of my almost deserted city, my old memories and my current thoughts were like the coming together of two rivers. I'd left the others snoring inside, descended the wide stairway from the Altar, paused to read one of the inscriptions from Perikles' funeral oration —"The entire Earth is the tomb of great men"—there on the side of the Memorial to the Unknown Soldier, and I studied for a moment those great-thewed limbs of that archaic warrior, laid out with all his weapons on his funeral bed, all marble and bas-relief, yet somehow almost warm, because night becomes Athens—and then I walked on by, passing up Leoforos Amalias.

It had been a fine dinner: ouzo, giuvetsi, Kokkineli, yaourti, Metaxa, lots of dark coffee, and Phil arguing with George about evolution.

"Do you not see a convergence of life and myth, here, during the last days of life on this planet?"

"What do you mean?" asked George, polishing off a mess of narantzi and adjusting his glasses for peering.

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"I mean that, as humanity rose out of darkness it brought with it legends and myths and memories of fabulous creatures. Now we are descending again into that same darkness. The Life Force grows weak and unstable, there is a revision to those primal forms which for so long had existed only as dim racial memories—"

"Nonsense, Phil. Life Force? In what century do you make your home? You speak as though all of life were one single, sentient entity."

"It is."

"Demonstrate, please."

"You have the skeletons of three satyrs in your museum, and photographs of live ones. They live in the hills of this country.

"Centaurs too, have been seen here—and there are vampire flowers, and horses with vestigial wings. There are sea serpents in every sea. Imported spiderbats plow our skies. There are even sworn statements by persons who have seen the Black Beast of Thessaly, an eater of men, bones and all—quite mythy—and all sorts of other legends are coming alive."

George sighed.

"What you have said so far proves nothing other than that in all of infinity there is a possibility for any sort of life form to put in an appearance, given the proper precipitating factors and a continuous congenial environment. The things you have mentioned which are native to Earth are mutations, creatures originating near various Hot Spots about the world. There is one such place up in the hills of Thessaly. If the Black Beast were to crash through that door at this moment, with a satyr mounted on its back, it would not alter my opinion, nor prove yours."

I'd looked at the door at that moment, hoping not for the Black Beast, but for some inconspicuous-looking old man who might sidle by, stumble, and pass on, or for a waiter bringing Diane an unordered drink with a note folded inside the napkin.

But none of these things happened. As I passed up Leoforos Amalias, by Hadrian's Gate, and past the Olympieion, I still did not know what the word was to be. Diane had contacted the Radpol, but there had been no response as yet. Within another thirty-six hours we would be skimming from Athens to Lamia, then onward by foot through areas of strange new trees with long, pale, red-veined leaves, hanging vines, and things that brachiate up above, and all the budding places of the strigue-fleur down among their roots; and then on, across sun-washed plains, up twisty goat trails, through high, rocky places, and down deep ravines, past ruined monasteries. It was a crazy notion, but Myshtigo, again, had wanted it that way. Just because I was born there, he

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thought he'd be safe. I'd tried to tell him of the wild beasts, of the cannibal Kouretes—the tribesmen who wandered there. But he wanted to be like Pausanius and see it all on foot. Okay then, I decided, if the Radpol didn't get him, then the fauna would.

But, just to be safe, I had gone to the nearest Earthgov Post Office, obtained a duelling permit, and paid my death-tax. I might as well be on the up-and-up about these things, I decided, me being a Commissioner and all.

If Hasan needed killing, I'd kill him legally.

The street was deserted, was quite dark. I turned right into Leoforos Dionysiou Areopagitou and moved on until I reached the battered fence that runs along the southern slope of the Acropolis.

I heard a footfall, way back behind me, at the corner. I stood there for half a minute, but there was only silence and very black night. Shrugging, I entered the gate and moved to the tenemos of Dionysius Eleutherios. Nothing remains of the temple itself but the foundation. I passed on, heading toward the Theater.

I moved to the proskenion. The relief sculpture-work started at the steps, telling tales from the life of Dionysius. Every tour guide and every member of a tour must, under a regulation promulgated by me (Number 237.1, if you care), ". . . Carry no fewer than three magnesium flares on his person, while traveling." I pulled the pin from one and cast it to the ground. The dazzle would not be visible below, because of the angle of the hillside and the blocking masonry.

I did not stare into the bright flame, but above, at the silver-limned figures. There was Hermes, presenting the infant god to Zeus, while the Corybantes tripped the Pyrrhic fantastic on either side of the throne; then there was Ikaros, whom Dionysius had taught to cultivate the vine—he was preparing to sacrifice a goat, while his daughter was offering cakes to the god (who stood aside, discussing her with a satyr); and there was drunken Silenus, attempting to hold up the sky like Atlas, only not doing so well; and there were all the other gods of the cities, paying a call to this Theater—and I spotted Hestia, Theseus, and Eirene with a horn of plenty . . .

"You burn an offering to the gods," came a statement from nearby.

I did not turn. It had come from behind my right shoulder, but I did not turn because I knew the voice.

"Perhaps I do," I said.

"It has been a long time since you walked this land, this Greece."

"That is true."

"Is it because there has never been an immortal Penelope—patient as the mountains, trusting in

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the return of her kallikanzaros—weaving, patient as the hills?"

"Are you the village story-teller these days?"

He chuckled.

"I tend the many-legged sheep in the high places, where the fingers of Aurora come first to smear the sky with roses."

"Yes, you're the story-teller. Why are you not up in the high places now, corrupting youth with your song?"

"Because of dreams."

"Dreams?"

"Aye."

I turned and looked into the ancient face—its wrinkles, in the light of the dying flare, as black as fishers' nets lost at the bottom of the sea, the beard as white as the snow that comes drifting down from the mountains, the eyes matching the blue of the headcloth corded about his temples. He did not lean upon his staff any more than a warrior leans on his spear. I knew that he was over a century old, and that he had never taken the S-S series.

"There before me lay Athens," he told me. "This place, this Theater, you—and here sat the old women. The one who measures out the thread of life was pouting, for she had wrapped yours about the horizon and no ends were in sight. But the one who weaves had divided it into two very thin threads. One strand ran back across the seas and vanished again from sight. The other led up into the hills. At the first hill stood the Dead Man, who held your thread in his white, white hands. Beyond him, at the next hill, it lay across a burning rock. On the hill beyond the rock stood the Black Beast, and he shook and worried your thread with his teeth.

"And all along the length of the strand stalked a great foreign warrior, and yellow were his eyes and naked the blade in his hands, and he did raise this blade several times in menace.

"So I came down to Athens—to meet you, here, at this place—to tell you to go back across the seas—to warn you not to come up into the hills where death awaits you. For I knew that the dreams were not mine, but that they were meant for you, oh my father, and that I must find you here and warn you. Go away now, while still you can. Go back. Please."

I gripped his shoulder.

"Jason, my son, I do not turn back. I take full responsibility for my own actions, right or wrong—including my own death, if need be—and I *must* go into the hills this time, up near the Hot Place. Thank you for your warning. Our family has always had this thing with dreams, and often it is misleading. I too, have dreams—dreams in which I see through the eyes of other persons—sometimes clearly, sometimes not so clearly.

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Thank you for your warning. I am sorry that I must not heed it."

"Then I will return to my flock."

"Come back with me to the inn. We will fly you as far as Lamia tomorrow."

"No. I do not sleep in great buildings, nor do I fly."

"Then it's probably time you started, but I'll humor you. We can camp here tonight. I'm Commissioner of this monument."

"I had heard you were important in the Big Government again. Will there be more killing?"

"I hope not."

We found a level place and reclined upon his cloak.

"How do you interpret the dreams?" I asked him.

"Your gifts do come to us with every season, but when was the last time you yourself visited?"

"It was about nineteen years ago," I said.

"Then you do not know of the Dead Man?"

"No."

"He is bigger than most men—taller, fatter—with flesh the color of a fishbelly, and teeth like an animal's. They began telling of him about fifteen years ago. He comes out only at night. He drinks blood. He laughs a child's laugh as he goes about the countryside looking for blood—people's, animals', it does not matter. He smiles in through bedroom windows late at night. He burns churches. He curdles milk. He causes miscarriages from fright. By day, it is said that he sleeps in a coffin, guarded by the Kourete tribesmen."

Strange things do come out of the Hot Places," I said. "*We* know that."

". . . Where Prometheus spilled too much of the fire of creation."

"No, where some bastard lobbed a cobalt bomb and the bright-eyed boys and girls cried 'Eloi' to the fallout. —And what of the Black Beast?"

"The size of an elephant, and very fast—an eater of flesh, they say. He haunts the plains. Perhaps some day he and the Dead Man will meet and they will destroy one another."

"It doesn't usually work out that way, but it's a nice thought. —That's all you know about him?"

"Yes, I know of no one who has caught more than a glimpse."

"Well, I shall try for less than that."

". . . And then I must tell you of Bortan."

"Bortan? That name is familiar."

"Your dog. I used to ride on his back when I was a child and beat with my legs upon his great armored sides. Then he would growl and seize my foot, but gently."

"*My* Bortan has been dead for so long that he would not even chew upon his own bones, were he to dig them up in a modern incarnation."

"I had thought so, too. But two

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days after you departed, from your last visit, he came crashing into the hut. He apparently had followed your trail across half of Greece."

"You're sure it was Bortan?"

"Was there ever another dog the size of a small horse, with armor plates on his sides, and jaws like a trap for bears?"

"No, I don't think so. That's probably why the species died out. Dogs do need armor plating if they're going to hang around with people, and they didn't develop it fast enough. If he is still alive, he's probably the last dog on Earth. He and I were puppies together, you know, so long ago that it hurts to think about it. That day he vanished while we were hunting I thought he'd had an accident. I searched for him, then decided he was dead. He was incredibly old at the time."

"Perhaps he was injured, and wandering that way—for years. But he was himself and he followed your track, that last time. When he saw that you were gone, he howled and took off after you again. We have never seen him since then. Sometimes though, late at night, I hear his hunting-cry in the hills. . . ."

"The damfool mutt ought to know it's not right to care for anything that much."

"Dogs were strange."

"Yes, dogs were."

And then the night wind, cool through arches of the years, came hounding after me. It touched my eyes. Tired, they closed.

Greece is lousy with legend, fraught with menace. Most areas of mainland near the Hot Places are historically dangerous. This is because, while the Office theoretically runs the Earth, it actually only tends to the islands. Office personnel on much of the mainland are rather like twentieth-century Revenue Officers were in certain hill areas. They're fair game in all seasons. The island sustained less damage than the rest of the world during the Three Days, and consequently they were the logical outposts for world district offices when the Talerites decided we could use some administration. Historically, the mainlanders have always been opposed to this. In the regions about the Hot Places though, the natives are not always completely human. This compounds the historical antipathy with abnormal behavior patterns. This is why Greece is fraught.

We could have sailed up the coast to Volos. We could have skimmed to Volos—or almost anywhere else, for that matter. Myshtigo wanted to hike from Lamia though, to hike and enjoy the refreshment of legend and alien scenery. This is why we left the Skimmers at Lamia. This is why we hiked to Volos.

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This is why we encountered legend.

I bade Jason "good-bye" in Athens. He was sailing up the coast. Wise.

Phil had insisted on enduring the hike, rather than skimming ahead and meeting us up further along the line. Good thing too, maybe, in a way, sort of . . .

The road to Volos wanders through the thick and the sparse in the way of vegetation. It passes huge boulders, occasional clusters of shacks, fields of poppies; it crosses small streams, winds about hills, sometimes crosses over hills, widens and narrows without apparent cause.

It was still early morning. The sky was somehow a blue mirror, because the sunlight seemed to be coming from everywhere. In places of shade some moisture still clung to the grasses and the lower leaves of the trees.

It was in an interesting glade along the road to Volos that I met a half-namesake.

The place had once been a shrine of some sort, back in the Real Old Days. I came to it quite often in my youth because I liked the quality of—I guess you'd call it "peace"—that it contained. Sometimes I'd meet the half-people or the no-people there, or dream good dreams, or find old pottery or the heads of statues, or things like that, which I could sell down in Lamia or in Athens.

There is no trail that leads to it. You just have to know where it is. I wouldn't have taken them there, except for the fact that Phil was along and I knew that he liked anything which smacks of an adytum, a sequestered significance, a sliding-panel view onto dim things past, etcetera.

There is a short, sharp drop, and down below is an egg-shaped clearing, about fifty meters long, twenty across, and the small end of the egg butting into a bitten-out place in the rock; there is a shallow cave at the extreme end, usually empty. A few half-sunken, almost square stones stand about in a seemingly random way. Wild grapevines grow around the perimeter of the place, and in the center is an enormous and ancient tree whose branches act as an umbrella over almost the entire area, keeping it dusky throughout the day. Because of this, it is hard to see into the place.

But we could see a satyr in the middle, picking his nose.

I saw George's hand go to the mercy-gun he carried. I caught his shoulder, his eyes, shook my head. He shrugged, nodded, dropped his hand.

I withdrew from my belt the shepherd's pipes I had asked Jason to give me. I motioned to the others to crouch and remain where they were. I moved a few steps further ahead and raised the syrinx to my lips.

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My first notes were quite tentative. It had been too long since I'd played the pipes.

His ears pricked forward and he looked all about him. He made rapid moves in three different directions—like a startled squirrel, uncertain as to which tree to make for.

Then he stood there quivering as I caught up an old tune and nailed it to the air.

I kept playing, remembering, remembering the pipes, the tunes, and the bitter, the sweet, and the drunken things I've really always known. It all came back to me as I stood there playing for the little guy in the shaggy leggings: the fingering and the control of the air, the little runs, the thorns of sound, the things only the pipes can really say. I can't play in the cities, but suddenly I was me again, and I saw faces in the leaves and I heard the sound of hooves. I moved forward.

Like in a dream, I noticed I was standing with my back against the tree, and they were all about me. They shifted from hoof to hoof, never staying still, and I played for them as I had so often before, years ago, not knowing whether they were really the same ones who'd heard me then—or caring, actually. They cavorted about me. They laughed through white, white teeth and their eyes danced, and they circled, jabbing at the air with their horns, kicking their goat legs high off the ground, bending far forward, springing into the air, stamping the earth.

I stopped, lowered the pipes.

It was not an human intelligence that regarded me from those wild, dark eyes, as they all froze into statues, just standing there, staring at me.

I raised the pipes once more, slowly. This time I played the last song I'd ever made. I remembered it so well. It was a dirge-like thing I had played on the night I decided Karaghiosis should die.

I had seen the fallacy of Return. They would not come back, would never come back. The Earth would die. I had gone down into the Gardens and I played this one last tune I'd learned from the wind and maybe even the stars. When I had finished it I didn't play any more. The next day, Karaghiosis' big blazeboat broke up in the bay at Piraeus.

They seated themselves on the grass. Occasionally, one would dab at his eye with an elaborate gesture. They were all about me, listening.

How long I played, I do not know. When I had finished, I lowered the pipes and sat there. After a time, one of them reached out and touched the pipes and drew his hand back quickly. He looked up at me.

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"Go," I said, but they did not seem to understand.

So I raised the syrinx and played the last few bars over again.

*The Earth is dying, dying. Soon it will be dead . . . Go home, the party's over. It's late, it's late, so late . . .*

The biggest one shook his head.

*Go away, go away, go away now. Appreciate the silence. After life's most ridiculous gambit, appreciate the silence. What did the gods hope to gain, to gain? Nothing. 'Twas all but a game. Go away, go away, go away now. It's late, it's late, so late . . .*

They still sat there, so I stood up and clapped my hands, yelled "Go!" and walked away quickly.

I gathered my companions and headed back for the road.

It is about sixty-five kilometers from Lamia to Volos, including the detour around the Hot Spot. We covered maybe a fifth of that distance on the first day. That evening, we pitched our camp in a clearing off to the side of the road, and Diane came up beside me and said, "Well?"

"'Well' what?"

"I just called Athens. Blank. The Radpol is silent. I want your decision now."

"You are very determined. Why can't we wait some more?"

"We've waited too long as it is. Supposing he decides to end the tour ahead of schedule?—This countryside is perfect. So many accidents could come so easily here . . . You know what the Radpol will say—the same as before—and it will signify the same as before: Kill."

"My answer is also the same as before: No."

She blinked rapidly, lowered her head.

"Please reconsider."

"No."

"Then do this much," she said. "Forget it. The whole thing. Wash your hands of the affair. Take Lorel up on his offer and get us a new guide. You can skim out of here in the morning."

"No."

"Are you really serious then—about protecting Myshtigo?"

"Yes."

"I don't want you hurt, or worse."

"I'm not particularly fond of the idea myself. So you can save us both a lot of trouble by calling it off."

"I can't do that."

"Dos Santos does as you tell him."

"The problem is *not* an administrative one!—Damn it! I wish I'd never met you!"

"I'm sorry."

"The Earth is at stake and you're on the wrong side."

"I think you are."

"What are you going to do about it?"

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"I can't convince you, so I'll just have to stop you."

"You couldn't turn in the Secretary of the Radpol and his consort without evidence. We're too ticklish politically."

"I know that."

"So you couldn't hurt Don, and I don't believe you'd hurt me."

"You're right."

"That leaves Hasan."

"Right again."

"And Hasan is—Hasan. What will you do?"

"Why don't you give him his walking papers right now and save me some trouble?"

"I won't do that."

"I didn't think you would."

She looked up again. Her eyes were moist, but her face and voice were unchanged.

"If it should turn out that you were right and we were wrong," she said, "I am sorry."

"Me too," I said. "Very, very."

That night I dozed within knifing distance of Myshtigo, but nothing happened or tried to. The following morning was uneventful, as was most of the afternoon.

"Myshtigo," I said, as soon as we paused for purposes of photographing a hillside, "why don't you go home? Go back to Taler? Go anywhere? Walk away from it? Write some other book? The further we get from civilization, the less is my power to protect you."

"You gave me an automatic, remember?" he said.

He made a shooting motion with his right hand.

If only he weren't so uncommunicative, so alien, so unconcerned about his welfare! I hated him. I couldn't understand him. He wouldn't speak, unless it was to request information or to answer a question. Whenever he did answer questions, he was terse, allusive, insulting, or all three at once. He was smug, conceited, blue, and overbearing. It really made me wonder about the Shtigo-gens' tradition of philosophy, philanthropy and enlightened journalism. I just didn't like him.

But I spoke to Hasan that evening, after having kept an eye (the blue one) on him all day.

He was sitting beside the fire, looking like a sketch by Delacroix. Ellen and Dos Santos sat nearby, drinking coffee, so I dusted off my Arabic and approached.

"Greetings."

"Greetings."

"You did not try to kill him today."

"No."

"Tomorrow, perhaps?"

He shrugged.

"Hasan—look at me."

He did.

"You were hired to kill the blue one."

He shrugged again.

"You needn't deny it, or admit

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it. I already know. I cannot allow you to do this thing. Give back the money Dos Santos had paid you and go your way. I can get you a Skimmer by morning. It will take you anywhere in the world you wish to go." . .

"But I am happy here, Karagee."

"You will quickly cease being happy if any harm comes to the blue one."

"I am a bodyguard, Karagee."

"No, Hasan. You are the son of a dyspeptic camel."

"What is 'dyspeptic', Karagee?"

"I do not know the Arabic word, and you would not know the Greek one. Wait, I'll find another insult.—You are a coward and a carrion-eater and a skulker up alleyways, because you are half jackal and half ape."

"This may be true, Karagee, because my father told me that I was born to be flayed alive and torn into quarters."

"Hasan, it is difficult to insult you properly," I said. "But I warn you—the blue one must not be harmed."

"I am but a humble bodyguard."

"Ha! Yours is the cunning and the venom of the serpent. You are deceitful and treacherous. Vicious, too."

"No, Karagee. Thank you, but it is not true. I take pride in always meeting my commitments. That is all. This is the law I live by. Also, you cannot insult me so that I will challenge you to a duel, permitting you to choose bare hands or daggers or sabers. No. I take no offense."

"Then beware," I told him. "Your first move toward the Vegan will be your last."

"If it is so written, Karagee . . ."

"And call me Conrad!"

I stalked away, thinking bad thoughts.

We made well over a dozen kilometers the next day, which was pretty good, considering. And it was that evening that it happened.

We reclined about a fire. Oh, it was a jolly fire, flapping its bright wing against the night, warming us, smelling woody, pushing a smoke-track into the air . . . Nice.

Hasan sat there cleaning his aluminum-barreled shotgun. It had a plastic stock and it was real light and handy.

As he worked on it, it tilted forward, moved slowly about, pointed itself right at Myshtigo.

He'd done it quite neatly, I must admit that. It was during a period of over half an hour, and he'd advanced the barrel with almost imperceptible movements.

I snarled though, when its position registered in my cerebrum, and I was at his side in three steps.

I struck it from his hands.

It clattered on some small

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stones about eight feet away. My hand was stinging from the slap I'd given it.

Hasan was on his feet, his teeth shuttling around inside his beard, clicking together like flint and steel. I could almost see the sparks.

"Say it!" I said. "Go ahead, say something! Anything! You know damn well what you were just doing!"

His hands twitched.

"Go ahead!" I said. "Hit me! Just touch me, even. Then what I do to you will be self-defense, provoked assault. Even George won't be able to put you back together again."

"I was only cleaning my shotgun. You've damaged it."

"*You* do not point weapons by accident. You were going to kill Myshtigo."

"You are mistaken."

"Hit me. Or are you a coward?"

"I have no quarrel with you."

"You *are* a coward."

"No, I am not."

After a few seconds he smiled.

"Are you afraid to challenge *me*?" he asked.

And there it was. The only way.

The move had to be mine. I had hoped it wouldn't have to be that way. I had hoped that I could anger him or shame him or provoke him into striking me or challenging me.

I knew then that I couldn't.

Which was bad, very bad.

I was sure I could take him with anything I cared to name. But if he had it his way, things could be different. Everybody knows that there are some people with an aptitude for music. They can hear a piece once and sit down and play it on the piano or the instra. They can pick up a new instrument, and inside a few hours they can sound as if they've been playing it for years. They're good, very good at such things, because they have that talent—the ability to coordinate a special insight with a series of new actions.

Hasan was that way with weapons. Maybe some other people could be the same, but they don't go around doing it—not for decades and decades anyway, with everything from boomerangs to blowguns. The duelling code would provide Hasan with the choice of means, and he was the most highly skilled killer I'd ever known.

But I had to stop him, and I could see that this was the only way it could be done, short of murder. I had to take him on his terms.

"Amen," I said. "I challenge you to a duel."

His smile remained, grew.

"Agreed—before these witnesses. Name your second."

"Phil Graber. Name yours."

"Mister Dos Santos."

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"Very good. I happen to have a duelling permit and the registration forms in my bag, and I've already paid the death-tax for one person. So there needn't be much of a delay. When, where, and how do you want it?"

"We passed a good clearing about a kilometer back up the road."

"Yes, I recall it."

"We shall meet there at dawn tomorrow."

"Check. And as to weapons . . . ?"

He fetched his knapcase, opened it. It bristled with interesting sharp things, glistened with ovoid incendiaries, writhed with coils of metal and leather.

He withdrew two items and closed the pack.

My heart sank.

"The sling of David," he announced.

I inspected them.

"At what distance?"

"Fifty meters," he said.

"You've made a good choice," I told him, not having used one in over a century myself. "I'd like to borrow one tonight, to practice with. If you don't want to lend it to me, I can make my own."

"You may take either, and practice all night with it."

"Thanks." I selected one and hung it from my belt. Then I picked up one of our three electric lanterns. "If anybody needs me, I'll be up the road at the clearing," I said. "Don't forget to post guards tonight. This is a rough area."

"Do you want me to come along?" asked Phil.

"No. Thanks anyway. I'll go alone. See you."

"Then good night."

I hiked back along the way, coming at last to the clearing. I set up the lantern at one end of the place, so that it reflected upon a stand of small trees, and I moved to the other end.

I collected some stones and slung one at a tree. I missed.

I slung a dozen more, hitting with four of them.

I kept at it. After about an hour, I was hitting with a little more regularity. Still, at fifty meters I probably couldn't match Hasan.

The night wore on, and I kept slinging. After a time, I reached what seemed to be my learning plateau, accuracy-wise. Maybe six out of eleven of my shots were coming through.

I had one thing in my favor though, I realized, as I twirled the sling and sent another stone smashing into a tree. I delivered my shots with an awful lot of force. Whenever I was on target there was much power behind the strike. I had already shattered several of the smaller trees, and I was sure Hasan couldn't do that with twice as many hits. If I could reach him, fine; but all the power

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in the world was worthless if I couldn't connect with it.

And I was sure he could reach me. I wondered how much of a beating I could take and still operate.

It would depend, of course, on where he hit me.

I dropped the sling and yanked the automatic from my belt when I heard a branch snap, far off to my right. Hasan came into the clearing.

"What do you want?" I asked him.

"I came to see how your practice was going," he said, regarding the broken trees.

I shrugged, reholstered my automatic, picked up the sling.

"Comes the sunrise and you will learn."

We walked across the clearing and I retrieved the lantern. Hasan studied a small tree which was now, in part, toothpicks. He did not say anything.

We walked back to the camp. Everyone but Dos Santos had turned in. Don was our guard. He paced about the warning perimeter, carrying an automatic rifle. We waved to him and entered the camp.

Hasan always pitched a Gauzy —a one-molecule-layer tent— opaque, feather-light, and very tough. He never slept in it, though. He just used it to stash his junk.

I seated myself on a log before the fire and Hasan ducked inside his Gauzy. He emerged a moment later with his pipe and a block of hardened, resinous-looking stuff, which he proceeded to scale and grind. He mixed it with a bit of burley and then filled the pipe.

After he got it going with a stick from the fire, he sat smoking it beside me.

"I do not want to kill you, Karagee," he said.

"I share this feeling. I do not wish to be killed."

"But we must fight tomorrow."

"Yes."

"You could withdraw your challenge."

"You could leave by Skimmer."

"I will not."

"Nor will I withdraw my challenge."

"It is sad," he said, after a time. "Sad, that two such as we must fight over the blue one. He is not worth your life, or mine."

"True," I said, "but it involves more than just his life. The future of this planet is somehow tied up with whatever he is doing."

"I do not know of these things, Karagee. I fight for money. I have no other trade."

"Yes, I know."

The fire burnt low. I fed it more sticks.

"Do you remember the time we bombed the Coast of Gold, in France?" he asked.

"I remember."

"Besides the blue ones, we killed many people."

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"Yes."

"The future of the planet was not changed by this, Karagee. For here we are, many years away from the thing, and nothing is different."

"I know that."

"And do you remember the days when we crouched in a hole on a hillside, overlooking the bay at Piraeus? Sometimes you would feed me the belts and I would strafe the blazeboats, and when I grew tired you would operate the gun. We had much ammunition. The Office Guard did not land that day, nor the next. They did not occupy Athens, they did not break the Radpol. And we talked as we sat there, those two days and that night, waiting for the fireball to come—and you told me of the Powers in the Sky."

"I forget . . ."

"I do not. You told me that there are men, like us, who live up in the air by the stars. Also, there are the blue ones. Some of the men, you said, seek the blue ones' favor, and they would sell the Earth to them to be made into a museum. Others, you said, did not want to do this thing, but they wanted it to remain as it is now—their property, run by the Office. The blue ones were divided among themselves on this matter, because there was a question as to whether it was legal and ethical to do this thing. There was a compromise, and the blue ones were sold some clean areas, which they used as resorts, and from which they toured the rest of the Earth. But you wanted the Earth to belong only to people. You said that if we gave the blue ones an inch, then they would want it all. You wanted the men by the stars to come back and rebuild the cities, bury the Hot Places, kill the beasts which prey upon men.

"As we sat there, waiting for the fireball, you said that we were at war, not because of anything we could see or hear or feel or taste, but because of the Powers in the Sky, who had never seen us, and whom we would never see. The Powers in the Sky had done this thing, and because of it men had to die here on Earth. You said that by the death of men and blue ones, the Powers might return to Earth. They never did, though. There was only the death.

"And it was the Powers in the Sky which saved us in the end, because they had to be consulted before the fireball could be burnt over Athens. They reminded the Office of an old law, made after the time of the Three Days, saying that the fireball would never again burn in the skies of Earth. You had thought that they would burn it anyhow, but they did not. It was because of this that we stopped them at Piraeus. I burnt Madagaskee for you, Karagee, but the Powers never came down to Earth. And when people get much money

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they go away from here—and they never come back from the sky. Nothing we did in those days has caused a change."

"Because of what we did, things remained as they were, rather than getting worse," I told him.

"What will happen if this blue one dies?"

"I do not know. Things may worsen then. If he is viewing the areas we pass through as possible real estate tracts, to be purchased by Vegans, then it is the old thing all over again."

"And the Radpol will fight again, will bomb them?"

"I think so."

"Then let us kill him now, before he goes further, sees more."

"It may not be that simple—and they would only send another. There would also be repercussions—perhaps mass arrests of Radpol members. The Radpol is no longer living on the edge of life as it was in those days. The people are unready. They need time to prepare. This blue one, at least, I hold in my hand. I can watch him, learn of his plans. Then, if it becomes necessary, I can destroy him myself."

He drew on his pipe. I sniffed. It was something like sandalwood that I smelled.

"What are you smoking?"

"It comes from near my home. I visited there recently. It is one of the new plants which has never grown there before. Try it."

I took several mouthfuls into my lungs. At first there was nothing. I continued to draw on it, and after a minute there was a gradual feeling of coolness and tranquility which spread down through my limbs. It tasted bitter, but it relaxed. I handed it back. The feeling continued, grew stronger. It was very pleasant. I had not felt that sedate, that relaxed, for many weeks. The fire, the shadows, and the ground about us suddenly became more real, and the night air and the distant moon and the sound of Dos Santos' footsteps came somehow more clearly than life, really. The struggle seemed ridiculous. We would lose it in the end. It was written that humanity was to be the cats and dogs and trained chimpanzees of the real people, the Vegans—and in a way it was not such a bad idea. Perhaps we needed someone wiser to watch over us, to run our lives. We had made a shambles of our own world during the Three Days, and the Vegans had never had a nuclear war. They operated a smoothly efficient interstellar government, encompassing dozens of planets. Whatever they did was esthetically pleasing. Their own lives were well-regulated, happy things. Why not let them have the Earth? They'd probably do a better job with it than we'd ever done. And why not be their coolies, too? It wouldn't be a bad life. Give them

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the old ball of mud, full of radioactive sores and populated by cripples.

Why not?

I accepted the pipe once more, inhaled more peace. It was so pleasant not to think of these things at all, though. Not to think of anything you couldn't really do anything about. Just to sit there and breathe in the night and be one with the fire and the wind was enough. The universe was singing its hymn of oneness. Why open the bag of chaos there in the cathedral?

But I had lost my Cassandra, my dark witch of Kos, to the mindless powers which move the Earth and the waters. Nothing could kill my feeling of loss. It seemed further away, somehow insulated behind glass, but it was still there. Not all the pipes of the East could assuage this thing. I did not want to know peace. I wanted hate. I wanted to strike out at all the masks in the universe—earth, water, sky, Taler, Earthgov, and Office—so that behind one of them I might find that power which had taken her, and make it too, know something of pain. I did not want to know peace. I did not want to be at one with anything which had harmed that which was mine, by blood and by love. For just five minutes even, I wanted to be Karaghiosis again, looking at it all through crosshairs and squeezing a trigger.

*Oh Zeus, of the hot red lightnings,* I prayed, *give it to me that I may break the Powers in the Sky!*

I returned the pipe again.

"Thank you, Hasan, but I'm not ready for the Bo Tree."

I stood then and moved off toward the place where I had cast my pack.

"I am sorry that I must kill you in the morning," he called after me.

The world outside us was bright and clear and clean and filled with the singing of birds, and there were no-expressions on every face that morning.

I had forbidden the use of the radio until after the duel, and Phil carried some of its essential entrails in his jacket pocket, just to be sure.

Lorel would not know. The Radpol would not know. Nobody would know, until after.

The preliminaries completed, the distance was measured off.

We took our places at the opposite ends of the clearing. The rising sun was to my left.

"Are you ready, gentlemen?" called out Dos Santos.

"Yes," and "I am," were the replies.

"I make a final attempt to dissuade you from this course of action. Do either of you wish to reconsider?"

"No," and "No."

"Each of you has ten stones of similar size and weight. The first

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shot is, of course, given to he who was challenged: Hasan."

We both nodded.

"Proceed then."

He stepped back and there was nothing but fifty meters of air separating us. We both stood sideways, so as to present the smallest target possible. Hasan fitted his first stone to the sling.

I watched him wind it rapidly through the air behind him, and suddenly his arm came forward.

There was a crashing sound in back of me.

Nothing else happened.

He'd missed.

I put a stone to my own sling then and whipped it back and around. The air sighed as I cut it all apart.

Then I hurled the missile forward with all the strength of my right arm.

It grazed his left shoulder, barely touching it. It was mostly garment that it plowed.

The stone richocheted from tree to tree behind him, before it finally vanished.

All was still then. The birds had given up on their morning concert.

"Gentlemen," called Dos Santos, "you have each had one chance to settle your differences. It may be said that you have faced one another with honor, given vent to your wrath, and are now satisfied. Do you wish to stop the duel?"

"No," said I.

Hasan rubbed his shoulder, shook his head.

He put the second stone to his sling, worked it rapidly through a powerful windup, then released it at me.

Right between the hip and the ribcage, that's where it caught me.

I fell to the ground and it all turned black.

A second later the lights came on again, but I was doubled up and something with a thousand teeth had me by the side and wouldn't let go.

They were running toward me, all of them, but Phil waved them back.

Hasan held his position.

Dos Santos approached.

"Is that it?" asked Phil softly. "Can you get up?"

"Yeah. I need a minute to breathe and to put the fire out, but I'll get up."

"What is the situation?" asked Dos Santos.

Phil told him.

I put my hand to my side and stood again, slowly.

A couple inches higher or lower and something boney might have broken. As it was, it just hurt like blazes.

I rubbed it, moved my right arm through a few circles to test the play of muscles on that side.

Then I picked up the sling and put a stone to it.

This time it would connect. I had a feeling.

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It went around and around and it came out fast.

Hasan toppled, clutching at his left thigh.

Dos Santos went to him. They spoke.

Hasan's robe had muffled the blow, had partly deflected it. The leg was not broken. He would continue as soon as he could stand.

He spent five minutes massaging it, then he got to his feet again. During that time my pain had subsided to a dull throbbing.

Hasan selected his third stone.

He fitted it slowly, carefully . . .

He took my measure. Then he began to lash at the air with the sling. . . .

All this while I had the feeling —and it kept growing—that I should be leaning a little further to the right. So I did.

He twirled it, threw it.

It grazed my fungus and tore at my left ear.

Suddenly my cheek was wet.

Ellen screamed, briefly.

A little further to the right though, and I wouldn't have been hearing her.

It was my turn again.

Smooth, gray, the stone had the feel of death about it . . .

*I will be it,* this one seemed to say.

It was one of those little premonitory tuggings at my sleeve, of the sort for which I have a great deal of respect.

I wiped the blood from my cheek. I fitted the stone.

There was death riding in my right arm as I raised it. Hasan felt it too, because he flinched. I could see this from across the field.

"You will all remain exactly where you are, and drop your weapons," said the voice.

It said it in Greek, so no one but Phil and Hasan and I understood it, for sure. Maybe Dos Santos or Red Wig did. I'm still not certain.

But all of us understood the automatic rifle the man carried, and the swords and clubs and knives of the three dozen or so men and half-men standing behind him.

They were Kouretes.

Kouretes are bad.

They always get their pound of flesh.

Usually roasted.

The speaker seemed to be the only one carrying a firearm. . . . And I had a handful of death circling high above my shoulder. I decided to make him a gift of it.

His head exploded as I delivered it.

"Kill them!" I said, and we began to do so.

George and Diane were the first to open fire. Then Phil found a handgun. Dos Santos ran for his pack. Ellen got there fast, too.

Hasan had not needed my order to begin killing. The only weapons he and I were carrying were the slings. The Kouretes were closer

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than our fifty meters though, and theirs was a mob formation. He dropped two of them with well-placed stones before they began their rush. I got one more, also.

Then they were halfway across the field, leaping over their dead and their fallen, screaming as they came on toward us.

Like I said, they were not all of them human: there was a tall, thin one with three-foot wings covered with sores, and there were a couple microcephalics with enough hair so that they looked headless, and there was one guy who should probably have been twins, and then several steatopygiacs, and three huge, hulking brutes who kept coming despite bullet-holes in their chests and abdomens; one of these latter had hands which must have been twenty inches long and a foot across, and another appeared to be afflicted with something like elephantiasis. Of the rest, some were reasonably normal in form, but they all looked mean and mangy and either wore rags or no rags at all and were unshaven and smelled bad, too.

I hurled one more stone and didn't get a chance to see where it hit, because they were upon me then.

I began lashing out—feet, fists, elbows; I wasn't too polite about it. The gunfire slowed down, stopped. You have to stop to reload sometime, and there'd been some jamming, too. The pain in my side was a very bad thing. Still, I managed to drop three of them before something big and blunt caught me on the side of the head and I fell as a dead man falls.

Coming to in a stiflingly hot place . . .

Coming to in a stiflingly hot place that smells like a stable . . .

Coming to in a dark, stiflingly hot place that smells like a stable . . .

. . . This is not real conducive to peace of mind, a settled stomach, or the resumption of sensory activities on a sure and normal keel.

It stank in there and it was damn hot, and I didn't really want to inspect the filthy floor too closely—it was just that I was in a very good position to do so.

I moaned, numbered all my bones, and sat me up.

The ceiling was low and it slanted down even lower before it met with the back wall. The one window to the outside was small and barred.

We were in the back part of a wooden shack. There was another barred window in the opposite wall. It didn't look out on anything, though; it looked in. There was a larger room beyond it, and George and Dos Santos were talking through it with someone who stood on that other side. Hasan lay unconscious or dead about four

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feet away from me; there was dried blood on his head. Phil and Myshtigo and the girls were talking softly in the far corner.

I rubbed my temple while all this was registering within. My left side ached steadily, and various other portions of my anatomy had decided to join in the game—if each of them had glowed with a different color, I'd have looked like a Yule tree.

"He's awake," said Myshtigo.

"Hi, everybody. I'm back again," I agreed.

They came toward me and I assumed a standing position. This was sheer bravado, but I managed to carry it.

"We are prisoners," said Myshtigo.

"Oh, yeah? Really? I'd never have guessed."

"Things like this do not happen on Taler," he observed, "or on any of the worlds in the Vegan Combine."

"Too bad you didn't stay there," I said. "Don't forget the number of times I asked you to go back."

"This thing would not have occurred if it had not been for your duel."

I slapped him then. I couldn't bring myself to slug him. He was just too pathetic. I hit him with the back of my hand and knocked him over into the wall.

"Are you trying to tell me you don't know why I stood there like a target this morning?"

"Because of your quarrel with my bodyguard," he stated, rubbing his cheek.

"—Over whether or not he was going to kill you."

"Me? Kill. . . ?"

"Forget it," I said.

"We are going to die here, aren't we?" he asked.

"That is the custom of the country."

I turned away and studied the man who was studying me from the other side of the bars. Hasan was leaning against the far wall then, holding his head. I hadn't noticed his getting up.

"Good afternoon," said the man behind the bars, and he said it in English.

"*Is* it afternoon?" I asked.

"Quite," he replied.

"Why aren't we dead?" I asked him.

"Because I wanted you alive," he stated. "Oh, not you personally—Conrad Nomikos, Commissioner of Arts, Monuments and Archives—and all your distinguished friends, including the poet laureate. I wanted any prisoners whom they came upon brought back alive. Your identities are, shall we say, condiments."

"To whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?" I asked.

"This is Doctor Moreby," said George.

"He is their witch doctor," said Dos Santos.

"I prefer 'Shaman' or 'Medicine

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Chief,' " corrected Moreby, smiling.

I moved closer to the grillwork and saw that he was rather thin, well-tanned, clean-shaven, and had all his hair woven into one enormous black braid which was coiled like a cobra about his head. He had close-set eyes, dark ones, a high forehead, and lots of extra jaw reaching down past his Adam's Apple. He wore woven sandals, a clean green sari, and a necklace of human fingerbones. In his ears were big snake-shaped circlets of silver.

"Your English is rather precise," said I, "and 'Moreby' is not a Greek name."

"Oh goodness!" He gestured gracefully, in mock surprise. "I'm not a local! How could you ever mistake me for a local?"

"Sorry," I said, "I can see now that you're too well-dressed."

He giggled.

"Oh, *this* old rag . . . I just threw it on.—No, I'm from Taler. I read some wonderfully rousing literature on the subject of Returnism, and I decided to come back and help rebuild the Earth."

"Oh? What happened then?"

"The Office was not hiring at the time, and I experienced some difficulty in finding employment locally. So I decided to engage in research work. This place is full of opportunities for that."

"What sort of research?"

"I hold two graduate degrees in cultural anthropology, from New Harvard. I decided to study a Hot tribe in depth—and after some blandishments I got this one to accept me. I started out to educate them, too. Soon though, they were deferring to me, all over the place. Wonderful for the ego. After a time, my studies, my social work, came to be of less and less importance. Well, I daresay you've read *Heart of Darkness*—you know what I mean. The local practices are so—well, basic. I found it much more stimulating to participate than to observe. So I took it upon myself to redesign some of their grosser practices along more esthetic lines. So I did really educate them, after all. They do things with ever so much style since I've come here."

"*Things*? Such as?"

"Well, for one thing, they were simple cannibals before. For another, they were rather unsophisticated in their use of their captives prior to slaying them. Things like that are quite important. If they're done properly they give you class, if you know what I mean. Here I was with a wealth of customs, superstitions, taboos—from many cultures, many eras—right here, at my fingertips." He gestured again. "Man—even half-man, Hot man—is a ritual-loving creature, and I knew ever so many rituals and things like that. So I put all of this to good use and now I occupy a position of great honor.

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"What are you trying to tell me about *us*?" I asked.

"Things were getting rather dull around here," he said, "and the natives were waxing restless. So I decided it was time for another ceremony. I spoke with Procrustes, the War Chief, and suggested he find us some prisoners. I believe it is on page 577 of the abridged edition of *The Golden Bough* that it states, 'The Tolalaki, notorious head-hunters of Central Celebes, drink the blood and eat the brains of their victims that they may become brave. The Italones of the Philippine Islands drink the blood of their slain enemies, and eat part of the back of their heads and of their entrails raw to acquire their courage.'—Well, we have the tongue of a poet, the blood of two very formidable warriors, the brains of a very distinguished scientist, the bilious liver of a fiery politician, and the interesting-colored flesh of a Vegan—all in this one room here. Quite a haul, I should say."

"You make yourself exceedingly clear," I observed. "What of the women?"

"Oh, for them we'll work out a protracted fertility rite ending in a protracted sacrifice."

"I see."

". . . That is to say, if we do not permit all of you to continue on your way, unmolested."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Procrustes likes to give people a chance to measure themselves against a standard, to be tested, and possibly to redeem themselves. He is most Christian in this respect."

"And true to his name, I suppose?"

Hasan came over and stood beside me, stared out through the grillwork at Moreby.

"Oh, good, good," said Moreby. "Really, I'd like to keep you around awhile, you know? You have a sense of humor. Most of the Kouretes lack this adjunct to what are otherwise exemplary personalities. I could learn to like you . . ."

"Don't bother. Tell me about the way of redemption, though."

"Yes. We are the wardens of the Dead Man. He is my most interesting creation. I am certain that one of you two shall realize this during your brief acquaintanceship with him." He glanced from me to Hasan to me to Hasan.

"I know of him," I said. "Tell me what must be done."

"You are called upon to bring forth a champion to do battle with him, this night, when he rises again from the dead."

"What is he?"

"A vampire."

"Crap. What is he really?"

"He is a genuine vampire. You'll see."

"Okay, have it your way. He's a vampire, and one of us will fight him. How?"

"Catch-as-catch-can, bare-

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handed—and he isn't very difficult to catch. He'll just stand there and wait for you. He'll be very thirsty, and hungry too, poor fellow."

"And if he is beaten, do your prisoners go free?"

"That is the rule, as I originally outlined it some sixteen or seventeen years ago. Of course, this contingency has never arisen . . ."

"I see. You're trying to tell me he's tough."

"Oh, he's unbeatable. That's the fun of it. It wouldn't make for a good ceremony if it could end any other way. I tell the whole story of the battle before it takes place, and then my people witness it. It reaffirms their faith in destiny and my own close association with its workings."

He yawned, covering his mouth with a feathered wand.

"I must go to the barbecue area now, to supervise the decking of the hall with boughs of holly. Decide upon your champion this afternoon, and I'll see you all this evening. Good day."

"Trip and break your neck."

He smiled and left the shack.

I called a meeting.

"Okay," I said, "they've got a weird weird Hot One called the Dead Man, who is supposed to be very tough. I am going to fight him tonight. If I can beat him we are supposed to go free, but I wouldn't take Moreby's word for anything. Therefore, we must plan an escape, else we will be served up on a chafing dish.

"Phil, do you remember the road to Volos?" I asked.

"I think so. It's been a long time . . . But where are we now, exactly?"

"If it is of any help," answered Myshtigo, from beside the window, "I see a glowing. It is not any color for which there is a word in your language, but it is off in that direction." He pointed. "It is a color which I normally see in the vicinity of radioactive materials if the atmosphere is dense enough about them. It is spread over quite a large area."

I moved to the window and stared in that direction.

"That could be the Hot Spot, then," I said. "If that is the case, then they've actually brought us further along toward the coast, which is good. Was anyone conscious when we were brought here?"

No one answered.

"All right. Then we'll operate under the assumption that that *is* the Hot Spot, and that we are very close to it. The road to Volos should be back that way then." I pointed in the opposite direction. "Since the sun is on this side of the shack and it's afternoon, head in the other direction after you hit the road—away from the sunset. It might not be more than twenty-five kilometers."

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"They will track us," said Dos Santos.

"There are horses," said Hasan.

"What?"

"Up the street, in a paddock. There were three near that rail earlier. They are back behind the edge of the building now. There may be more. They were not strong-looking horses, though."

"Can all of you ride?" I asked.

"I have never ridden a horse," said Myshtigo, "but the *thrid* is something similar. I have ridden *thrid*."

Everyone else had ridden horses.

"Tonight then," said I. "Ride double if you must. If there are more than enough horses, then turn the others loose, drive them away. As they watch me fight the Dead Man you will make a break for the paddock. Seize what weapons you can and try to fight your way to the horses.

"—Phil, get them up to Makrynitsa and mention the name of Korones anywhere. They will take you in and protect you."

"I am sorry," said Dos Santos, "but your plan is not a good one."

"If you've got a better one, let's hear it," I told him.

"First of all," he said, "we cannot really rely on Mister Graber. While you were still unconscious he was in great pain and very weak. George believes that he suffered a heart attack during or shortly after our fight with the Kouretes. If anything happens to him we are lost. We will need you to guide us out of here, if we do succeed in breaking free. We *cannot* count on Mister Graber.

"Second," he said, "you are not the only man capable of fighting an exotic menace. Hasan will undertake the defeat of the Dead Man."

"I can't ask him to do that," I said. "Even if he wins, he will probably be separated from us at the time, and they'll doubtless get to him pretty fast. It would most likely mean his life. You hired him to kill for you, not to die."

"I will fight him, Karagee," he said.

"You don't have to."

"I will kill the Dead Man," said Hasan, "and I will follow after you. I know the ways of hiding myself from men. I will follow your trail."

"It's my job," I told him.

"Then, since we cannot agree, leave the decision to the fates," said Hasan. "Toss a coin."

"Very well. Did they take our money as well as our weapons?"

"I have some change," said Ellen.

"Toss a piece into the air."

She did.

"Heads," said I, as it fell toward the floor.

"Tails," she replied.

"Don't touch it!"

It was tails, all right. And there was a head on the other side, too.

"Okay, Hasan, you lucky fellow, you," I said. "You just won a

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do-it-yourself Hero Kit, complete with a monster. Good luck."

He shrugged.

"It was written."

He sat down then, his back against the wall, extracted a tiny knife from the sole of his left sandal, and began to pare his fingernails. He'd always been a pretty well-groomed killer. I guess cleanliness is next to diablerie, or something like that . . .

As the sun sank slowly in the west, Moreby came to us again, bringing with him a contingent of Kourete swordsmen.

"The time has come," he stated. "Have you decided upon your champion?"

"Hasan will fight him," I said.

"Very good. Then come alone. Please do not try anything foolish. I should hate to deliver damaged goods at a festival."

Walking within a circle of blades we left the shack and moved up the street of the village, passing by the paddock. Eight horses, heads low, stood within. Even in the diminishing light I could see that they were not very good horses. Their flanks were all covered with sores, and they were quite thin. Everyone glanced at them as we went by.

The village consisted of about thirty shacks, such as the one in which we had been confined. It was a dirt road that we walked on, and it was full of ruts and rubbish. The whole place smelled of sweat and urine and rotten fruit and smoke.

We went about eighty meters and turned left. It was the end of the street, and we moved along a downhill path into a big, cleared compound. A fat, bald-headed woman with enormous breasts and a face that was a lava field of carcinoma was tending a low and dreadfully suggestive fire at the bottom of a huge barbecue pit. She smiled as we passed by and smacked her lips moistly.

Great, sharpened stakes lay on the ground about her . . .

Up further ahead was a level area of hardpacked bare earth. A huge, vine-infested, tropic-type tree which had adapted itself to our climate stood at the one end of the field, and all about the field's peripheries were rows of eight-foot torches, already waving great lengths of fire like pennants. At the other end was the most elaborate shack of them all. It was about five meters high and ten across the front. It was painted bright red and covered all over with Pennsylvania hex signs. The entire middle section of the front wall was a high, sliding door. Two armed Kouretes stood guard before that door.

The sun was a tiny piece of orange-rind in the west. Moreby marched us the length of the field toward the tree.

Eighty to a hundred spectators

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were seated on the ground on the other side of the torches, on each side of the field.

Moreby gestured, indicating the red shack.

"How do you like my home?" he asked.

"Lovely," said I.

"I have a roommate, but he sleeps during the day. You're about to meet him."

We reached the base of the big tree. Moreby left us there, surrounded by his guards. He moved to the center of the field and began addressing the Kouretes in Greek.

We had agreed that we would wait until the fight was near its end, whichever way, and the tribesmen all excited and concentrating on the finale, before we made our break. We'd pushed the women into the center of our group, and I managed to get on the left side of a right-handed swordsman, whom I intended to kill quickly. Too bad that we were at the far end of the field. To get to the horses we'd have to fight our way back through the barbecue area.

". . . And then, on that night," Moreby was saying, "did the Dead Man rise up, smiting down this mighty warrior, Hasan, breaking his bones and casting him about this place of feasting. Finally, did he kill this great enemy and drink the blood from his throat and eat of his liver, raw and still smoking in the night air. These things did he do on that night. Mighty is his power."

"Mighty, of mighty!" cried the crowd, and someone began beating upon a drum.

"Now will we call him to life again . . ."

The crowd cheered.

"To life again!"

"To life again."

"Hail!"

"Hail!"

"Sharp white teeth . . ."

"Sharp white teeth!"

"White, white skin . . ."

"White, white skin!"

"Hands which break . . ."

"Hands which break!"

"Mouth which drinks . . ."

"Mouth which drinks!"

"The blood of life!"

"The blood of life!"

"Great is our tribe!"

"Great is our tribe!"

"Great is the Dead Man!"

"GREAT IS THE DEAD MAN!"

They bellowed it, at the last. Throats human, half-human, and inhuman, heaved the brief litany like a tidal wave across the field. Our guards too, were screaming it. Myshtigo was blocking his sensitive ears and there was an expression of agony on his face. My head was ringing too. Dos Santos crossed himself and one of the guards shook his head at him and Don shrugged and turned his head back toward the field.

Moreby walked up to the shack

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and struck three times upon the sliding door with his wand.

One of the guards pushed it open for him.

An immense black catafalque, surronded by the skulls of men and animals, was set within. It supported an enormous casket made of dark wood and decorated with bright twisting lines.

At Moreby's directions, the guards raised the lid.

For the next twenty minutes he gave hypodermic injections to something within the casket. He kept his movements slow and ritualistic. One of the guards put aside his blade and assisted him. The drummers kept up a steady, slow cadence. The crowd was very silent, very still.

Then Moreby turned.

"Now the Dead Man rises," he announced.

". . . Rises," responded the crowd.

"Now he comes forth to accept the sacrifice."

"Now he comes forth . . ."

"Come forth, Dead Man," he called, turning back to the catafalque.

And he did.

At great length.

For he was big.

Huge, obese.

Great indeed was the Dead Man.

Maybe 350 pounds' worth.

He sat up in his casket and he looked all about him. He rubbed his chest, his armpits, his neck, his groin. He climbed out of the big box and stood beside the catafalque, dwarfing Moreby.

He was wearing only a loincloth and large, goatskin sandals.

His skin was white, dead white, fishbelly white, moon white . . . Dead white.

"An albino," said George, and his voice carried the length of the field because it was the only sound in the night.

Moreby glanced in our direction and smiled. He took the Dead Man's stubby-fingered hand and led him out of the shack and onto the field. The Dead Man shied away from the torchlight. As he advanced, I studied the expression on his face.

"There is no intelligence in that face," said Red Wig.

"Can you see his eyes?" asked George, squinting his own. His glasses had been broken in the fray.

"Yes, they're pinkish."

"Does he have epicanthial folds?"

"Mm . . . Yeah."

"Uh-huh. He's a Mongoloid—an idiot, I'll wager—which is why it was so easy for Moreby to do what he's done with him—and look at his teeth! They look filed."

I did. He was grinning, because he'd seen the colorful top of Red Wig's head. Lots of nice, sharp teeth were exposed.

"His albinism is the reason be-

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hind the nocturnal habits Moreby has imposed. Look! He even flinches at the torchlight! He's ultrasensitive to any sort of actinics."

"What about his dietary habits?"

"Acquired, through imposition. Lots of primitive people bled their cattle. The Kazaks did it until the twentieth century, and the Todas. You saw the sores on those horses as we passed by the paddock. Blood *is* nourishing, you know, if you can learn to keep it down—and I'm sure Moreby has regulated the idiot's diet since he was a child. So of course he's a vampire, he was brought up that way."

"The Dead Man is risen," said Moreby.

"The Dead Man is risen," agreed the crowd.

"Great is the Dead Man!"

"Great is the Dead Man!"

He dropped the deadwhite hand then and walked toward us, leaving the only genuine vampire we knew of grinning in the middle of the field.

"Great is the Dead Man," he said, grinning himself as he approached us. "Rather magnificent, isn't he?"

"What have you done to that poor creature?" asked Red Wig.

"Very little," replied Moreby. "He was born pretty well-equipped."

"What were those injections you gave him?" inquired George.

"Oh, I shoot his pain centers full of Novocain before encounters such as this one. His lack of pain responses adds to the image of his invicibility. Also, I've given him a hormone shot. He's been putting on weight recently, and he's grown a bit sluggish. This compensates for it."

"You talk of him and treat him as though he's a mechanical toy," said Diane.

"He is. An invincible toy. An invaluable one, also.—You there, Hasan. Are you ready?" he asked.

"I am," Hasan answered, removing his cloak and his burnoose and handing them to Ellen.

The big muscles in his shoulders bulged, his fingers flexed lightly, and he moved forward and out of the circle of blades. There was a welt on his left shoulder, several others on his back. The torchlight caught his beard and turned it to blood, and I could not help but remember that night back at the *hounfor* when he had enacted a strangling, and Mama Julie had said, "Your friend is possessed of Angelsou," and "Angelsou is a deathgod and he only visits with his own."

"Great is the warrior, Hasan," announced Moreby, turning away from us.

"Great is the warrior, Hasan," replied the crowd.

"His strength is that of many."

"His strength is that of many," the crowd responded.

"Greater still is the Dead Man."

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"Greater still is the Dead Man."

"He breaks his bones and casts him about this place of feasting."

"He breaks his bones . . ."

"He eats his liver."

"He eats his liver."

"He drinks the blood from his throat."

"He drinks the blood from his throat."

"Mighty is his power."

"Mighty is his power."

"Great is the Dead Man!"

"Great is the Dead Man!"

"Tonight," said Hasan quietly, "he becomes the Dead Man indeed."

"Dead Man!" cried Moreby, as Hasan moved forward and stood before him, "I give you this man Hasan in sacrifice!"

Then Moreby got out of the way and motioned the guards to move us to the far sideline.

The idiot grinned an even wider grin and reached out slowly toward Hasan.

"Bismallah," said Hasan, making as if to turn away from him, and bending downward and to the side.

He picked it off the ground and brought it up and around fast and hard, like a whiplash—a great heel-of-the-hand blow which landed on the left side of the Dead Man's jaw.

The white white head moved maybe five inches.

And he kept on grinning . . .

Then both of his short, bulky arms came out and caught Hasan beneath the armpits. Hasan seized his shoulders, tracing fine red furrows up his sides as he went, and he drew red beads from the places where his fingers dug into snow-capped muscle.

The crowd screamed at the sight of the Dead Man's blood. Perhaps the smell of it excited the idiot himself. That, or the screaming.

. . . Because he raised Hasan two feet off the ground and ran forward with him.

The big tree got in the way, and Hasan's head sagged as he struck.

Then the Dead Man crashed into him, stepped back slowly, shook himself, and began to hit him.

It was a real beating. He flailed at him with his almost grotesquely brief, thick arms.

Hasan got his hands up in front of his face and he kept his elbows in the pit of his stomach.

Still, the Dead Man kept striking him on his sides and head. His arms just kept rising and falling.

And he never stopped grinning.

Finally, Hasan's hands fell and he clutched them before his stomach.

. . . And there was blood coming from the corners of his mouth.

The invincible toy continued its game.

And then far, far off on the other side of the night, so far that only

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I could hear it, there came a voice that I recognized.

It was the great hunting-howl of my hellhound, Bortan.

Somewhere, he had come upon my trail, and he was coming now, running down the night, leaping like a goat, flowing like a horse or a river, all brindle-colored—and his eyes were glowing coals and his teeth were buzzsaws.

He never tired of running, my Bortan.

Such as he are born without fear, given to the hunt, and sealed with death.

My hellhound was coming, and nothing could halt him in his course.

But he was far, so far off, on the other side of the night . . .

The crowd was screaming. Hasan couldn't take much more of it. Nobody could.

From the corner of my eye (the brown one) I noticed a tiny gesture of Ellen's.

It was as though she had thrown something with her right hand . . .

Two seconds later it happened.

I looked away quickly from that point of brilliance that occurred, sizzling, behind the idiot.

The Dead Man wailed, lost his grin.

Good old Reg 237.1 (promulgated by me):

"Every tour guide and every member of a tour must carry no fewer than three magnesium flares on his person, while traveling."

Ellen only had two left, that meant. Bless her.

The idiot had stopped hitting Hasan.

He tried to kick the flare away. He screamed. He tried to kick the flare away. He covered his eyes. He rolled on the ground.

Hasan watched, bleeding, panting . . .

The flare burnt, the Dead Man screamed . . .

Hasan finally moved.

He reached up and touched one of the thick vines which hung from the tree. He tugged at it. It resisted. He pulled harder.

It came loose.

His movements were steadier as he twisted an end around each hand.

The flare sputtered, grew bright again . . .

He dropped to his knees beside the Dead Man, and with a quick motion he looped the vine about his throat.

The flare sputtered again.

He snapped it tight.

The Dead Man fought to rise.

Hasan drew the thing tighter.

The idiot seized him about the waist.

The big muscles in the Assassin's shoulders grew into ridges. Perspiration mingled with the blood on his face.

The Dead Man stood, raising Hasan with him.

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Hasan pulled harder.

The idiot, his face no longer white, but mottled, and with the veins standing out like cords in his forehead and neck, lifted him up off the ground. As I'd lifted the golem did the Dead Man raise Hasan, the vine cutting ever more deeply into his neck as he strained with all his inhuman strength.

The crowd was wailing and chanting incoherently. The drumming, which had reached a frenzied throb, continued at its peak without letup. And then I heard the howl again, still very far away.

The flare began to die.

The Dead Man swayed.

. . . Then, as a great spasm racked him, he threw Hasan away from him.

The vine went slack about his throat as it tore free from Hasan's grip.

Hasan took *ukemi* and rolled to his knees. He stayed that way.

The Dead Man moved toward him.

Then his pace faltered.

He began to shake all over. He made a gurgling noise and clutched at his throat. His face grew darker. He staggered to the tree and put forth a hand. He leaned there panting. Soon he was gasping noisily. His hand slipped along the trunk and he dropped to the ground. He picked himself up again, into a half-crouch.

Hasan arose and he recovered the piece of vine.

He advanced upon the idiot.

This time his grip was unbreakable.

The Dead Man fell, and he did not rise again.

It was like turning off a radio which had been playing at full volume:

Click . . .

Big silence then—it had all happened so fast. And tender was the night as I reached out through it and broke the neck of the swordsman at my side and seized his blade. I turned then to my left and split the skull of the next one with it.

Then, like *click* again, and full volume back on, but all static this time. The night was torn down through the middle.

Myshtigo dropped his man with a vicious rabbit-punch and kicked another in the shins. George managed a quick knee to the groin of the one nearest him.

Dos Santos, not so quick—or else just unlucky—took two bad cuts, chest and shoulder.

The crowd rose up from where it had been scattered on the ground, like a speedup film of beansprouts growing.

It advanced upon us.

Ellen threw Hasan's burnoose over the head of the swordsman who was about to disembowel her husband. Earth's poet laureate then brought a rock down hard on the top of the burnoose, doubtless

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collecting much bad karma but not looking too worried about it.

By then Hasan had rejoined our little group, using his hand to parry a sword cut by striking the flat of the blade in an old samuri manuver I had thought lost to the world forever. Then Hasan, too, had a sword—after another rapid movement—and he was very proficient with it.

We killed or maimed all our guards before the crowd was halfway to us, and Diane—taking a cue from Ellen—lobbed her three magnesium flares across the field and into the mob.

We ran then, Ellen and Red Wig supporting Dos Santos.

But the Kouretes had cut us off and we were running northwards, off at a tangent from our goal.

"We cannot make it, Karagee," called Hasan.

"I know."

". . . Unless you and I delay them while the others go ahead."

"Okay. Where?"

"At the far barbecue pit, where the trees are thick about the path. It is a bottle's neck. They will not be able to hit us all at a time."

"Right!—You hear us!?" I addressed the others. "Make for the horses! Phil will guide you! Hasan and I will hold them for as long as we can!"

Red Wig turned her head, began to say something.

"Don't argue! Go! You want to live, don't you!?"

They did. They went.

Hasan and I turned, there beside the barbecue pit, and we waited. The others cut back again, going off through the woods, heading toward the village and the paddock. The mob kept right on coming, toward Hasan and myself.

The first wave hit us and we began the killing. We were in the V-shaped place where the path disgorged from the woods onto the plain. To our left was a smouldering pit; to our right a thick stand of trees. Three did we kill and several set a-bleeding, ere they fell back, paused, then moved to flank us.

We stood back to back then and cut them as they closed.

"If even one has a gun we are dead, Karagee."

"I know."

Another half-man fell to my blade. Hasan sent one, screaming, into the pit.

They were all about us then. A blade slipped in past my guard and cut me on the shoulder.

"Fall back, thou fools! I say withdraw, thou freaks!"

At that, they did, moving back beyond thrust-range.

The man who had spoken was about five and a half feet tall. His lower jaw moved like that of a puppet's, as though on hinges, and his teeth were like a row of dominoes—all darkstained and clicking as they opened and closed.

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"Yea, Procrustes," I heard one say.

"Fetch nets! Snare them alive! Do not close with them! They have cost us too much already!"

Moreby was at his side, and whimpering.

". . . I did not know, m'lord."

"Silence! thou brewer of ill-tasting sloshes! Thou hast cost us a god and many men!"

"Shall we rush?" asked Hasan.

"No, but be ready to cut the nets when they bring them."

"It is not good that they want us alive," he decided.

"We have sent many to Hell, to smooth our way," said I, "and we are standing yet and holding blades. What more?"

"If we rush them we can take two, perhaps four more with us. If we wait, they will net us and we die without them."

"What matters it, once you are dead? Let us wait. So long as we live there is the great peacock-tail of probability, growing from out of the next moment."

"As you say."

And they found nets and cast them. We cut three of them apart before they tangled us in the fourth. They drew them tight and moved in.

I felt my blade wrenched from my grasp, and someone kicked me. It was Moreby.

"Now you will die as very few die," said he.

"Did the others escape?"

"Only for the moment," he said. "We will track them, find them, and bring them back."

I laughed.

"You lose," I said. "They'll make it."

He kicked me again.

"This is how your rule applies?" I asked. "Hasan conquered the Dead Man."

"He cheated. The woman threw a flare."

Procrustes came up beside him as they bound us within the nets.

"Of the death?" he asked.

"Let us take them to the Valley of Sleep," said Moreby, "and there work our wills with them and leave them to be preserved against future feasting."

"It is good," said Procrustes. "Yes, it shall be done."

Hasan must have been working his left arm through the netting all that while, because it shot out a short distance and his nails raked Procrustes' leg.

Procrustes kicked him several times, and me once for good measure. He rubbed at the scratches on his calf.

"Why did you do that, Hasan?" I asked, after Procrustes turned away and ordered us bound to barbecue stakes for carrying.

"There may still be some meta-cyanide left on my fingernails," he explained.

"How did it get there?"

"From the bullets in my belt, Karagee, which they did not take

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from me. I coated my nails after I sharpened them today."

"Ah! You scratched the Dead Man at the beginning of your bout . . ."

"Yes, Karagee. Then it was simply a matter of my staying alive until he fell over."

"You are an exemplary assassin, Hasan."

"Thank you, Karagee."

We were bound to the stakes, still netted. Four men, at the order of Procrustes, raised us.

Moreby and Procrustes leading the way, we were borne off through the night.

As we moved along an uneven trail the world changed about us. It's always that way when you approach a Hot Spot. It's like hiking backward through geological eras.

As we advanced along the way the trees grew smaller, the spaces between them wider. But they were not like the trees we had left beyond the village. There were twisted (and twisting!) forms, with seaweed swirls of branches, gnarled trunks, and exposed roots which crept, slowly, about the surface of the ground. Tiny invisible things made scratching noises as they scurried from the light of Moreby's electric lantern.

By twisting my head I could detect a faint, pulsating glow, just at the border of the visible spectrum. It was coming from up ahead.

A profusion of dark vines appeared underfoot. They writhed whenever one of our bearers stepped on them.

The trees became simple ferns. Then these, too, vanished. Great quantities of shaggy, blood-colored lichens replaced them. They grew over all the rocks. They were faintly luminous.

There were no more animal sounds. There were no sounds at all, save for the panting of our four bearers, the footfalls, and the occasional muffled click as Procrustes' automatic rifle struck a padded rock.

Our bearers wore blades in their belts. Moreby carried several blades, as well as a small pistol.

The trail turned sharply upward. One of our bearers swore. The night-tent was jerked downward at its corners then; it met with the horizon, and it was filled with the hint of a purple haze, fainter than exhaled cigarette-smoke. Slow, very high, and slapping the air like a devilfish coasting on water, the dark form of a spiderbat crossed over the face of the moon.

Procrustes fell.

Moreby helped him to his feet, but Procrustes swayed and leaned upon him.

"What ails you, lord?"

"A sudden dizziness, numbness in my members . . . Take thou my rifle. It grows heavy."

Hasan chuckled.

Procrustes turned toward Ha-

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san, his puppet-jaw dropping open.

Then he dropped, too.

Moreby had just taken the rifle and his hands were full. The guards set us down, rather ungently, and rushed to Procrustes' side.

"Hast thou any water?" he asked, and he closed his eyes.

He did not open them again.

Moreby listened to his chest, held the feathery part of his wand beneath his nostrils.

"He is dead," he finally announced.

"Dead?"

The bearer who was covered with scales began to weep.

"He wiss good," he sobbed. He wiss a great war shief. What will we do now?"

"He is dead," Moreby repeated, "and I am your leader until a new war chief is declared. Wrap him in your cloaks. Leave him on that flat rock up ahead. No animals come here, so he will not be molested. We will recover him on the way back. Now though, we must have our vengeance on these two." He gestured with his wand. "The Valley of Sleep is near at hand. You have taken the pills I gave you?"

"Yes."

"Yes."

"Yes."

"Yiss."

"Very good. Take your cloaks now and wrap him."

They did this, and soon we were raised again and borne to the top of a ridge froom which a trail ran down into a fluorescent, pock-blasted pit. The great rocks of the place seemed almost to be burning.

"This," I said to Hasan, "was described to me by my son as the place where the thread of my life lies across a burning stone. He saw me as threatened by the Dead Man, but the fates thought twice and gave that menace onto you. Back when I was but a dream in the mind of death, this site was appointed as one of the places where I might die."

"To fall from Shinvat is to roast," said Hasan.

They carried us down into the fissure, dropped us on the rocks.

Moreby released the safety catch on the rifle and stepped back.

"Release the Greek and tie him to that column." He gestured with the weapon.

They did this, binding my hands and feet securely. The rock was smooth, damp, killing without indication.

They did the same to Hasan, about eight feet to my right.

Moreby had set down the lantern so that it cast a yellow semicircle about us. The four Kouretes were demon statues at his side.

He smiled. He leaned the rifle against the rocky wall behind him.

"This is the Valley of Sleep," he told us. "Those who sleep here do not awaken. It keeps the meat preserved, however, providing us

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against the lean years. Before we leave you, though—" His eyes turned to me. "Do you see where I have set the rifle?"

I did not answer him.

"I believe your entrails will stretch that far, Commissioner. At any rate, I intend to find out." He drew a dagger from his belt and advanced upon me. The four half-men moved with him. "Who do you think has more guts?" he asked. "You or the Arab?"

Neither of us replied.

"You shall both get to see for yourselves," he said through his teeth. "First you!"

He jerked my shirt free and cut it down the front.

He rotated the blade in a slow significant circle about two inches away from my stomach, all the while studying my face.

"You are afraid," he said. "Your face does not show it yet, but it will."

Then, "Look at me! I am going to put the blade in very slowly. I am going to dine on you one day. What do you think of that?"

I laughed. It was suddenly worth laughing at.

His face twisted, then it straightened into a momentary look of puzzlement.

"Has the fear driven you mad, Commissioner?"

"Feathers or lead?" I asked him.

He knew what it meant. He started to say something, and then he heard a pebble click about twelve feet away. His head snapped in that direction.

He spent the last second of his life screaming, as the force of Brotan's leap pulped him against the ground, before his head was snatched from his shoulders.

My bellhound had arrived.

The Kouretes screamed, for his eyes are glowing coals and his teeth are buzzsaws. His head is as high above the ground as a tall man's. Although they seized their blades and struck at him, his sides are as the sides of an armadillo. A quarter ton of dog, my Bortan . . . He is not exactly the kind Albert Payson Terhune wrote about.

He worked for the better part of a minute, and when he was finished they were all in pieces and none of them alive.

"What is it?" asked Hasan.

"A puppy I found in a sack, washed up on the beach, too tough to drown—my dog," said I, "Bortan."

There was a small gash in the softer part of his shoulder. He had not gotten it in the fight.

"He sought us first in the village," I said, "and they tried to stop him. Many Kouretes have died this day."

He trotted up and licked my face. He wagged his tail, made dog-noises, wriggled like a puppy, and ran in small circles. He sprang toward me and licked my

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face again. Then he was off cavorting once more, treading on pieces of Kouretes.

"It is good for a man to have a dog," said Hasan. "I have always been fond of dogs."

Bortan was sniffing him as he said it.

"You've come back, you dirty old hound," I told him. "Don't you know that dogs are extinct?"

He wagged his tail, came up to me again, licked my hand.

"I'm sorry that I can't scratch your ears. You know that I'd like to though, don't you?"

He wagged his tail.

I opened and closed my right hand within its bonds. I turned my head that way as I did it. Bortan watched, his nostrils moist and quivering.

"Hands, Bortan. I need hands to free me. Hands to loosen my bonds. You must fetch them, Bortan, and bring them here."

He picked up an arm that was lying on the ground and he deposited it at my feet. He looked up then and wagged his tail.

"No, Bortan. *Live* hands. Friendly hands. Hands to untie me. You understand, don't you?"

He licked my hand.

"Go and find hands to free me. Still attached and living. The hands of friends. Now, quickly! Go!"

He turned and walked away, paused, looked back once, then mounted the trail.

"Does he understand?" asked Hasan.

"I think so," I told him. "His is not an ordinary dog brain, and he has had many many more years than even the lifetime of a man in which to learn understanding."

"Then let us hope he finds someone quickly, before we sleep."

"Yes."

We hung there and the night was cold.

We waited for a long time. Finally, we lost track of time.

Our muscles were cramped and aching. We were covered with the dried blood of countless little wounds. We were all over bruises. We were groggy from fatigue, from lack of sleep.

We hung there, the ropes cutting into us.

"Do you think they will make it to your village?"

"We gave them a good start. I think they have a decent chance."

"It is always difficult to work with you, Karagee."

"I know. I have noticed this same thing myself."

". . . Like the summer we rotted in the dungeons of Corsica."

"Aye."

". . . Or our march to the Chicago Station, after we had lost all our equipment in Ohio."

"Yes, that was a bad year."

"You are *always* in trouble though, Karagee. 'Born to knot the tiger's tail,' " he said, "that is the

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saying for people such as you. They are difficult to be with. Myself, I love the quiet and the shade, a book of poems, my pipe —"

"Hush! I hear something!"

There was a clatter of hooves.

A satyr appeared beyond the cockeyed angle of the light from the fallen lantern. He moved nervously, his eyes going from me to Hasan and back again, and up, down, around, and past us.

"Help us, little horny one," said I, in Greek.

He advanced carefully. He saw the blood, the mangled Kouretes.

He turned as if to flee.

"Come back! I need you! It is I, the player of the pipes."

He stopped and turned again, his nostrils quivering, flaring and falling. His pointed ears twitched.

He came back, a pained expression on his near-human face as he passed through the place of gore.

"The blade. At my feet," I said, gesturing with my eyes. "Pick it up."

He did not seem to like the notion of touching anything man-made, especially a weapon.

I whistled the last lines of my last tune.

—*It's late, it's late, so late* . . .

His eyes grew moist. He wiped at them with the backs of his shaggy wrists.

"Pick up the blade and cut my bonds. Pick it up.—Not that way, you'll cut yourself. The other end. —Yes."

He picked it up properly and looked at me. I moved my right hand.

"The ropes. Cut them."

He did. It took him fifteen minutes and left me wearing a bracelet of blood. I had to keep moving my hand to keep him from slashing an artery. But he freed it.

"Now give me the knife and I'll take care of the rest."

He placed the blade in my extended hand.

I took it. Seconds later I was free. Then I freed Hasan.

When I turned again the satyr was gone. I heard the sound of frantic hoofbeats in the distance.

I might say that if our party had taken the long way from Lamia to Volos—the coastal road—the whole thing might never have happened the way that it did, and Phil might be alive today. But I can't really judge all that occurred in this case; even now, looking back, I can't say how I'd rearrange events if it was all to be done over again. The Forces of final disruption were already goose-stepping amidst the ruins, arms upraised . . .

We made it to Volos the following afternoon, and on up Mount Pelion to Portaria. Across a deep ravine lay Makrynitsa.

We crossed over and found the others.

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Phil had guided them to Makrynitsa, asked for a bottle of wine and his copy of *Prometheus Unbound,* and had sat up with the two, well into the evening.

In the morning, Diane found him smiling, and cold.

I built him a pyre amidst the cedars near the ruined Episcopi, because he did not want to be buried. I heaped it with incense, with aromatic herbs, and it was twice the height of a man. That night it would burn and I would say good-bye to another friend. It seems, looking back, that my life has mainly been a series of arrivals and departures. I say "hello." I say "good-bye." Only the Earth endures . . .

Hell.

So I walked with the group that afternoon, out to Pagasae, the port of ancient Iolkos, set on the promontory opposite Volos. We stood in the shade of the almond trees on the hill that gives good vantage to both seascape and rocky ridge.

"It was from here that the Argonauts set sail on their quest for the Golden Fleece," I told no one in particular.

"Who all were they?" asked Ellen. "I read the story in school, but I forget."

"There was Herakles and Theseus and Orpheus the singer, and Asclepius, and the sons of the North Wind, and Jason, the captain, who was a pupil of the centaur, Cheiron—whose cave, incidentally, is up near the summit of Mount Pelion, there."

"Really?"

"I'll show it to you sometime."

"All right."

"The gods and the titans battled near here also," said Diane, coming up on my other side. "Did the titans not uproot Mount Pelion and pile it atop Ossa in an attempt to scale Olympus?"

"So goes the telling. But the gods were kind and restored the scenery after the bloody battle."

"A sail," said Hasan, gesturing with a half-peeled orange in his hand.

I looked out over the waters and there was a tiny blip on the horizon.

"Yes, this place is still used as a port."

"Perhaps it is a shipload of heroes," said Ellen, "returning with some more fleece. What will they do with all that fleece, anyhow?"

"It's not the fleece that's important," said Red Wig, "it's the getting of it. Every good story-teller used to know that. The womenfolk can always make stunning garments from fleeces. They're used to picking up the remains after quests."

"It wouldn't match your hair, dear."

"Yours either, child."

"That can be changed. Not so easily as yours, of course . . ."

"Across the way," said I, in a

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loud voice, "is a ruined Byzantine church—the Episcopi—which I've scheduled for restoration in another two years. It is the traditional site of the wedding feast of Peleus, also one of the Argonauts, and the sea-nymph Thetis. Perhaps you've heard the story of that feast? Everyone was invited but the goddess of discord, and she came anyhow and tossed down a golden apple marked 'For the Fairest'. Lord Paris judged it the property of Aphrodite, and the fate of Troy was sealed. The last time anyone saw Paris, he was none too happy. Ah, decisions! Like I've often said, this land is lousy with myth."

"How long will we be here?" asked Ellen.

"I'd like a couple more days in Makrynitsa," I said, "then we'll head northwards. Say, about a week more in Greece, and then we'll move on to Rome."

"No," said Myshtigo, who had been sitting on a rock and talking to his machine, as he stared out over the waters. "No, the tour is finished. This is the last stop."

"How come?"

"I'm satisfied and I'm going home now."

"What about your book?"

"I've got my story."

"What kind of story?"

"I'll send you an autographed copy when it's finished. My time is precious, and I've all the material I want now. All that I'll need, anyhow. I called the Port this morning, and they are sending me a Skimmer tonight. You people go ahead and do whatever you want, but I'm finished."

"Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing is wrong, but it's time that I left. I have much to do."

He rose to his feet and stretched.

"I have some packing to take care of, so I'll be going back now. You *do* have a beautiful country here, Conrad, despite. —I'll see you all at dinnertime."

He turned and headed down the hill.

I walked a few steps in his direction, watched him go.

"I wonder what prompted that?" I thought aloud.

There was a footfall.

"He is dying," said George, softly.

My son Jason, who had preceded us by several days, was gone. Neighbors told of his departure for Hades on the previous evening. The patriarch had been carried off on the back of a fire-eyed hell-hound who had knocked down the door of his dwelling place and borne him off through the night. My relatives all wanted me to come to dinner. Dos Santos was still resting; George had treated his wounds and not deemed it necessary to ship him to the hospital in Athens.

It's always nice to come home.

I walked down to the Square

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and spent the afternoon talking to my descendents. Would I tell them of Taler, of Haiti, of Athens? Aye. I would, I did. Would they tell me of the past two decades in Makrynitsa? Ditto.

I took some flowers to the graveyard then, stayed awhile, and went to Jason's home and repaired his door with some tools I found in the shed. Then I came upon a bottle of his wine and drank it all. And I smoked a cigar. I made me a pot of coffee too, and I drank all of that.

I still felt depressed.

I didn't know what was coming off.

George knew his diseases though, and he said the Vegan showed unmistakable symptoms of a neurological disorder of the e.t. variety. Incurable. Invariably fatal.

And even Hasan couldn't take credit for it. "Etiology unknown," 'twas.

So everything was revised.

George had known about Myshtigo since the reception.—What had set him on the track?"

—Phil had asked him to observe the Vegan for signs of a fatal disease.

Why?

Well, he hadn't said why, and I couldn't go ask him at the moment.

I had me a problem.

Myshtigo had either finished his job or he hadn't enough time left to do it. He *said* he'd finished it. If he hadn't, then I'd been protecting a dead man all the while, to no end. If he had, then I needed to know the results, so that I could make a very fast decision concerning what remained of his lifespan.

Dinner was no help. Myshtigo had said all he cared to say, and he ignored or parried our questions. So, as soon as we'd had our coffee, Red Wig and I stepped outside for a cigarette.

"What's happened?" she asked.

"I don't know. I thought maybe you did."

"No. What now?"

"You tell me."

"Kill him?"

"Perhaps yes. First though, why?"

"He's finished it."

"What? Just *what* has he finished?"

"How should I know?"

"Damn it! *I* have to! I like to know why I'm killing somebody, I'm funny that way."

"Funny? Very. Obvious, isn't it? The Vegans want to buy in again, Earthside. He's going back to give them a report on the sites they're interested in."

"Then why didn't he visit them all? Why cut it short after Egypt and Greece? Sand, rocks, jungles, and assorted monsters—that's all he saw. Hardly makes for an encouraging appraisal."

"Then he's scared, is why, and lucky he's alive. He could have

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been eaten by a boadile or a Kourete. He's running."

"Good. Then let him run. Let him hand in a bad report."

"He can't, though. If they *do* want in, they won't buy anything that sketchy. They'll just send somebody else—somebody tougher—to finish it. If we kill Myshtigo they'll know we're still for real, still protesting, still tough ourselves."

". . . And he's not afraid for his life."

"No? What then?"

"I don't know. I have to find out, though."

"How?"

"I think I'll ask him."

"You are a lunatic."

She turned away.

"My way, or not at all," I said.

"*Any* way, then. It doesn't matter. We've already lost."

I took her by the shoulders, kissed her neck.

"Not yet. You'll see."

She stood stiffly.

"Go home," she said, "it's late. It's too late."

I did that. I went back to Iakov Korones' big old place, where Myshtigo and I were both quartered, and where Phil had been staying.

I stopped, there in the death-room, in the place where Phil had last slept. His *Prometheus Unbound* was still on the writing table, set down beside an empty bottle. He had spoken of his own passing when he'd called me in Egypt, and he had suffered an attack, had been through a lot. It seemed he'd leave a message for an old friend then, on a matter like this.

So I opened Percy B's dud epic and looked within.

It was written on the blank pages at the end of the book, in Greek. Not modern Greek, though. Classical.

It went something like this:

"Dear friend, although I abhor writing anything I cannot rewrite, I feel I had best tend to this with dispatch. I am unwell. George wants me to skim to Athens. I will too, in the morning. First though, regarding the matter at hand—

"Get the Vegan off the Earth, alive, at any cost.

"It is important.

"It is the most important thing in the world.

"I was afraid to tell you before, because I though Myshtigo might be a telepath. That is why I did not go along for the entire journey, though I should dearly have loved to do so. That is why I pretended to hate him, so that I could stay away from him as much as possible. It was only after I managed to confirm the fact that he was not telepathic that I elected to join you.

"I suspected, what with Dos Santos, Diane, and Hasan, that the Radpol might be out for his

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blood. If he was a telepath, I figured he would learn of this quickly and do whatever needed to be done to assure his safety. If he was not a telepath, I still had great faith in your ability to defend him against almost anything, Hasan included. But I did not want him apprised of my knowledge. I *did* try to warn you though, if you recall.

"Tatram Yshtigo, his grandfather, is one of the finest, most noble creatures alive. He is a philosopher, a great writer, an altruistic administrator of services to the public. I became acquainted with him during my stay on Taler, thirty-some years ago, and we later became close friends. We have been in communication ever since that time, and that far back, even, was I advised by him of the Vegan Combine's plans regarding the disposition of Earth. I was also sworn to secrecy. Even Cort cannot know that I am aware. The old man would lose face, disastrously, if this thing came out ahead of time.

"The Vegans are in a very embarassing position. Our expatriate countrymen have forced their own economic and cultural dependence upon Vega. The Vegans were made aware—quite vividly!—during the days of the Radpol Rebellion, of the fact that there is an indigenous population possessing a strong organization of its own and desiring the restoration of our planet. The Vegans too, would like to see this happen. They do not want the Earth. Whatever for? If they want to exploit Earthfolk, they have more of them on Taler than we do here on Earth—and they're not doing it, not massively or maliciously, at any rate. Our ex-pop has elected what labor exploitation it does undergo in preference to returning here. What does this indicate? Returnism is a dead issue. No one is coming back. That is why I quit the movement. Why you did too, I believe. The Vegans would like to get the home world problem off their hands. Surely, they want to visit it. It is instructive, sobering, humbling, and downright frightening for them to come here and see what *can* be done to a world.

"What needed to be done was for them to find a way around our ex-pop-gov on Taler. The Talerites were not anxious to give up their only claim for taxes and existence: the Office.

"After much negotiation though, and much economic suasion, including the offer of full Vegan citizenship to our ex-pop, it appeared that a means had been found. The implementation of the plan was given into the hands of the Shtigo gens, Tatram in especial.

"He finally found a way, he believed, of returning the Earth proper to an autonomous position and preserving its cultural integri-

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ty. That is why he sent his grandson, Cort, to do his 'survey.' Cort is a strange creature; his real talent is acting (all the Shtigo are quite gifted), and he loves to pose. I believe that he wanted to play the part of an alien very badly, and I am certain that he has carried it with skill and efficiency. (Tatram also advised me that it would be Cort's *last* role. He is dying of *drinfan,* which is incurable; also, I believe it is the reason he was chosen.)

"Believe me, Konstantin Karaghiosis Korones Nomikos (and all the others which I do not know), Conrad, when I say that he was not surveying real estate."

"But allow me one last Byronic gesture. Take my word that he must live, and let me keep my promise and my secret. You will not regret it, when you know all.

"I am sorry that I never got to finish your elegy, and damn you for keeping my Lara, that time in Kerch!—Phil"

Very well then, I decided, life—not death—for the Vegan. Phil had spoken and I did not doubt his words.

I went back to Mikar Korones' dinner table and stayed with Myshtigo until he was ready to leave. I accompanied him back to Iakov Korones' and watched him pack some final items. We exchanged maybe six words during this time.

His belongings we carried out to the place where the Skimmer would land, in front of the house. Before the others (including Hasan) came up to bid him good-bye, he turned to me and he said: "Tell me, Conrad, why are you tearing down the pyramid?"

"To needle Vega," I said. "To let you know that if you want this place and you do manage to take it away from us, you'll get it in worse shape than it was after the Three Days. There wouldn't be anything left to look at. We'd burn the rest of our history. Not even a scrap for you guys."

The air escaping from the bottom of his lungs came out with a high-pitched whine—the Vegan equivalent of a sigh.

"Commendable, I suppose," he said, "but I did so want to see it. Do you think you could ever get it back together again? Soon, perhaps?"

"What do you think,"

"I noticed your men marking many of the pieces."

I shrugged.

"I have only one serious question then—about your fondness for destruction . . ." he stated.

"What is that?"

"Is it *really* art?"

"Go to hell."

Then the others came up. I shook my head slowly at Diane and seized Hasan's wrist long enough to tear away a tiny needle he'd taped to the palm of his hand.

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I let him shake hands with the Vegan too, then, briefly.

The Skimmer buzed down out of the darkening sky and I saw Myshtigo aboard, loaded his baggage personally, and closed the door myself.

It took off without incident and was gone in a matter of moments.

End of a nothing jaunt.

I went back inside and changed my clothing.

It was time to burn a friend.

Heaped high into the night, my ziggurat of logs bore what remained of the poet, my friend. I kindled a torch and put out the electric lantern. Hasan stood at my side. He had helped bear the corpse to the cart and had taken over the reins. I had built the pyre on the cypress-filled hill above Volos, near the ruins of that church I mentioned earlier. The waters of the bay were calm. The sky was clear and the stars were bright.

Dos Santos, who did not approve of cremation, had decided not to attend, saying that his wounds were troubling him. Diane had elected to remain with him back in Makrynitsa. She had not spoken to me since our last conversation.

Ellen and George were seated on the bed of the cart, which was backed beneath a large cypress, and they were holding hands. They were the only others present. Phil would not have liked my relatives wailing their dirges about him. He'd once said he wanted something big, bright, fast, and without music.

I applied the torch to a corner of the pyre. The flame bit, slowly; began to chew at the wood. Hasan started another torch going, stuck it into the ground, stepped back, and watched.

As the flames ate their way upwards I prayed the old prayers and poured out wine upon the ground. I heaped aromatic herbs onto the blaze. Then I, too, stepped back.

"'. . . Whatever you were, death has taken you, too,'" I told him. "'You have gone to see the moist flower open along Acheron, among Hell's shadows darting fitfully.' Had you died young, your passing would have been mourned as the destruction of a great talent before its fulfillment. But you lived and they cannot say that now. Some choose a short and supernal life before the walls of their Troy, others a long and less troubled one. And who is to say which is the better? The gods did keep their promise of Immortal fame to Achilleus, by inspiring the poet to sing him an immortal paean. But is he the happier for it, being now as dead as yourself? *I* cannot judge, old friend. Lesser bard, I remember some of the words you, too, wrote of the mightiest of the Argives, and of the time of hard-hurled deaths: 'Bleak disappointments rage this coming-together place: Menace of sighs in

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a jeopardy of time . . . But the ashes do not burn backward to timber. Flame's invisible music shapes the air to heat, but the day is no longer.' Fare thee well, Phillip Graber. May the Lords Phoebus and Dionysius, who do love and kill their poets, commend thee to their dark brother Hades. And may his Persephone, Queen of the Night, look with favor upon thee and grant thee high steal in Elysium. Good-bye."

The flames had almost reached the top.

I saw Jason then, standing beside the cart, Bortan seated by his side. I backed away further. Bortan came to me and sat down at my right. He licked my hand, once.

"Mighty hunter, we have lost us another," I said.

He nodded his great head.

The flames reached the top and began to nibble at the night. The air was filled with sweet aromas and the sound of fire.

Jason approached.

"Father," he said, "he bore me to the place of burning rocks, but you were already escaped."

I nodded.

"A no-man friend did free us from that place. Before that, this man Hasan destroyed the Dead Man. So your dreams have thus far proved both right and wrong."

"*He* is the yellow-eyed warrior of my vision," he said.

"I know, but that part too, is past."

"What of the Black Beast?"

"Not a snort nor a snuffle."

We watched for a long, long time, as the night retreated into itself. At several points, Bortan's ears pricked forward and his nostrils dilated. George and Ellen had not moved. Hasan was a strange-eyed watcher, without expression.

"What will you do now, Hasan?" I asked.

"Go again to Mount Sindjar," he said, "for awhile."

"And then?"

He shrugged.

"Howsoever it is written," he replied.

And a fearsome noise did come upon us then, like the groans of an idiot giant, and the sound of splintering trees accompanied it.

Bortan leapt to his feet and howled. The donkeys who had drawn the cart shifted uneasily. One of them made a brief, braying noise.

Jason clutched the sharpened staff which he had picked from the heap of kindling, and he stiffened.

It burst in upon us then, there in the clearing. Big, and ugly, and everything it had ever been called.

The Eater of Men . . .

The Shaker of the Earth . . .

The Mighty, Foul One . . .

The Black Beast of Thessaly.

Finally, someone could say what it really was. If they got away to say it, that is.

It must have been drawn to us by the odor of burning flesh.

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And it *was* big. The size of an elephant, at least.

What was Herakles' fourth labor?

The wild boar of Arcadia, that's what.

I suddenly wished Herk was still around, to help.

A big pig . . . A razorback, with tusks the length of a man's arm . . . Little pig eyes, black, and rolling in the firelight, wildly . . .

It knocked down trees as it came . . .

It squealed though, as Hasan drew a burning brand from the blaze and drove it, fire-end forward, into its snout, and then spun away.

It swerved too, which gave me time to snatch Jason's staff.

I ran forward and caught it in the left eye with it.

It swerved again then and squealed like a leaky boiler.

. . . And Bortan was upon it, tearing at its shoulder.

Neither of my two thrusts at its throat did more than superficial damage. It wrestled, shoulder against fang, and finally shook itself free of Bortan's grip.

Hasan was at my side by then, waving another firebrand.

It charged us.

From somewhere off to the side George emptied a machine-pistol into it. Hasan hurled the torch. Bortan leapt again, this time from its blind side.

. . . And these things caused it to swerve once more in its charge, crashing into the then-empty cart and killing both donkeys.

I ran against it then, thrusting the staff up under its left front leg.

The staff broke in two.

Bortan kept biting, and his snarl was a steady thunder. Whenever it slashed at him with its tusks he relinquished his grip, danced away, and moved in again to worry it.

I am sure that my needle-point deathlance of steel would not have broken. It had been aboard the *Vanitie,* though . . .

Hasan and I circled it with the sharpest and most stakelike of the kindling we could find. We kept jabbing, to keep it turning in a circle. Bortan kept trying for its throat, but the great snouted head stayed low, and the one eye rolled and the other bled, and the tusks slashed back and forth and up and down like swords. Cloven hooves the size of breadloaves tore great holes in the ground as it turned, counterclockwise, trying to kill us all, there in the orange and dancing flamelight.

Finally, it stopped and turned —suddenly, for something that big—and its shoulder struck Bortan in the side and hurled him ten or twelve feet past me. Hasan hit it across the back with his stick and I drove in toward the other eye, but missed.

Then it moved toward Bortan,

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who was still regaining his feet—its head held low, tusks gleaming.

I threw my staff and leapt as it moved in on my dog. It had already dropped its head for the death blow.

I caught both tusks as the head descended almost to the ground. Nothing could hold back that scooping slash, I realized, as I bore down upon it with all my strength.

But I tried, and maybe I succeeded, somehow, for a second . . .

At least, as I was thrown through the air, my hands torn and bleeding, I saw that Bortan had managed to get back out of the way.

I was dazed by the fall, for I had been thrown far and high; and I heard a great pig-mad squealing. Hasan screamed and Bortan roared out his great-throated battle-challenge once more.

. . . And the hot red lightning of Zeus descended twice from the heavens.

. . . And all was still.

I climbed back, slowly, to my feet.

Hasan was standing by the blazing pyre, a flaming stake still upraised in spear-throwing position.

Bortan was sniffing at the quivering mountain of flesh.

Cassandra was standing beneath the cypress beside a dead donkey, her back against the trunk of the tree, wearing leather trousers, a blue woolen shirt, a faint smile, and my still-smoking elephant gun.

"Uh—hi, Cassandra. How've you been?"

She dropped the gun and looked very pale. But I had her in my arms almost before it hit the ground.

"I'll ask you later," I said, "not now. Nothing now. Let's just sit here beneath this tree and watch the fire burn."

And we did.

A month later, Dos Santos was ousted from the Radpol. He and Diane have not been heard of since. Rumor has it that they gave up on Returnism, moved to Taler, and are living there now. I hope it's not true, what with the affairs of these past five days. I never did know the full story on Red Wig, and I guess I never will. If you trust a person, really trust him I mean, and you care for him, as she might have cared for me, it would seem you'd stick around to see whether he was right or wrong on your final big disagreement. She didn't though, and I wonder if she regrets it now?

I don't really think I'll ever see her again.

Slightly after the Radpol shake-up, Hasan returned from Mount Sindjar, stayed awhile at the Port, then purchased a small ship and put out to sea early one morning, without even saying "good-bye" or

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giving any indication as to his destination. It was assumed he'd found new employment somewhere. There was a hurricane though, several days later, and I heard rumors in Trinidad to the effect that he had been washed up on the coast of Brazil and met with his death at the hands of the fierce tribesmen who dwell there. I tried, but was unable to verify this story.

However, two months later, Ricardo Bonaventura, Chairman of the Alliance Against Progress, a Radpol splinter group which had fallen into disfavor with Athens, died of apoplexy during a Party function. There were some murmurings of Divban rabbit-venom in the anchovies (an exceedingly lethal combination, George assures me), and the following day the new Captain of the Palace Guard vanished mysteriously, along with a Skimmer and the minutes of the last three secret sessions of the AAP (not to mention the contents of a small wall-safe). He was said to have been a big, yellow-eyed man, with a slightly Eastern cast to his features.

Jason is still herding his many-legged sheep in the high places, up where the fingers of Aurora come first to smear the sky with roses, and doubtless he is corrupting youth with his song.

Ellen is pregnant again, all delicate and big-waisted, and won't talk to anybody but George. George wants to try some fancy embryosurgery, now before it's too late, and make his next kid a water-breather as well as an air-breather, because of all that great big virgin frontier down underneath the ocean, where his descendents can pioneer, and him be father to a new race and write an interesting book on the subject, and all that. Ellen is not too hot on the idea though, so I've a hunch the oceans will remain virgin a little longer.

I've decided to retain the Office for the time being. I'll set up some kind of parliament after I've whipped up an opposition party to the Radpol—Indreb, or something like that maybe: like Independent Rebuilders, or such.

Good old final forces of disruption . . . We needed them down here amid the ruins.

And Cassandra—my princess, my angel, my lovely lady—she even likes me without my fungus. That night in the Valley of Sleep did it in.

She, of course, was the shipload of heroes Hasan had seen that day back at Pagasae. No golden fleece though, just my gunrack and such. Yeah. It had been the *Golden Vanitie,* which I'd built by hand, me, stout enough, I was pleased to learn, to take even the *tsunami* that followed that 9.6 Richter thing. She'd been out sailing in it at the time the bottom fell out of Kos. Afterwards, she'd set sail for Volos because she knew Mak-

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rynitsa was full of my relatives. Oh, good thing—that she had this *feeling* that there was danger and had carried the heavy artillery ashore with her. (Good thing, too, that she knew how to use it.) I'll have to learn to take her premonitions more seriously.

I've purchased a quiet villa on the end of Haiti opposite from the Port. It's only about fifteen minutes' skimming time from there, and it has a big beach and lots of jungle all around it. I have to have some distance, like the whole island, between me and civilization, because I have this, well—hunting—problem. The other day, when the attorneys dropped around, they didn't understand the sign: "Beware the Dog." They do now. The one who's in traction won't sue for damages, and George will have him as good as new in no time. The others were not so severely taken.

Good thing I was nearby, though.

So here I am, in an unusual position as usual.

The entire planet Earth was purchased from the Talerite government, purchased by the large and wealthy Shtigo gens. The preponderance of expatriates wanted Vegan citizenship anyhow, rather than remaining under the Talerite ex-gov and working in the Combine as registered aliens. This had been coming for a long time, so the disposal of the Earth became mainly a matter of finding the best buyer—because our exile regime lost its only other cause for existence the minute the citizenship thing went through. They could justify themselves while there were still Earthmen out there, but now they're all Vegans and can't vote for them, and *we're* sure not going to, down here.

Hense, the sale of a lot of real estate—and the only bidder was the Shtigo gens.

Wise old Tatram saw that the Shtigo gens did not own Earth, though. The entire purchase was made in the name of his grandson, the late Cort Myshtigo.

And Myshtigo left this distribution-desire, or last will and testament, Vegan-style . . .

. . . In which I was named.

I've, uh, inherited a planet.

The Earth, to be exact.

Well—

Hell, I don't want the thing. I mean, sure I'm stuck with it for awhile, but I'll work something out.

It was that infernal Vite-Stats machine, and four other big think-tanks that old Tatram used. He was looking for a local administrator to hold the Earth in fief and set up a resident representative government, and then to surrender ownership on a fairly simple residency basis once things got rolling. He wanted somebody who'd been around awhile, was qualified as an administrator, and who wouldn't

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want to keep the place for his very own.

Among others, it gave him one of my names, then another, the second as a "possibly still living." Then my personnel file was checked, and more stuff on the other guy, and pretty soon the machine had turned up a few more names, all of them mine. It began picking up discrepancies and peculiar similarities, kept kapocketting, and gave out more puzzling answers.

Before long, Tatram decided I had better be "surveyed."

Cort came to write a book.

He really wanted to see if I was Good, Honest, Noble, Pure, Loyal, Faithful, Trustworthy, Selfless, Kind, Cheerful, Dependable, and Without Personal Ambition.

Which means he was a cockeyed lunatic, because he said, "Yes, he's all that."

I sure fooled him.

Maybe he was right about the lack of personal ambition, though. I am pretty damn lazy, and am not at all anxious to acquire the headaches I see as springing up out of the tormented Earth and blackjacking me daily.

However, I am willing to make certain concessions so far as personal comfort is concerned. I'll probably cut myself back to a six-month vacation.

One of the attorneys (not the one in traction—the one with the sling) delivered me a note from the Blue One. It said, in part:

"Dear Whatever-the-Blazes-Your-Name-Is,

"It is most unsettling to begin a letter this way, so I'll respect your wishes and call you Conrad.

" 'Conrad,' by now you are aware of the true nature of my visit. I feel I have made a good choice in naming you as heir to the property commonly referred to as Earth. Your affection for it cannot be gainsaid; as Karaghiosis you inspired men to bleed in its defense; you are restoring its monuments, preserving its works of art (and as one stipulation of my will, by the way, I insist that you put back the Great Pyramid!), and your ingenuity as well as your toughness, both physical and mental, is singularly amazing.

"You also appear to be the closest thing to an immortal overseer available (I'd give a lot to know your real age), and this, together with your high survival potential, makes you, really, the only candidate. If your mutation ever does begin to fail you, there is always the S-S series to continue linking the great chain of your days. (I could have said 'forging,' but it would not have been polite, inasmuch as I know you are an accomplished forger.—All those old records! You drove poor Vite-Stats half-mad with discrepancies. It is now programmed never to accept another Greek birth certificate as proof of age!)

". . . I commend the Earth

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into the hands of the kallikanzaros. According to legend, this would be a grave mistake. However, I am willing to gamble that you are even a kallikanzaros under false pretenses. You destroy only what you mean to rebuild. Probably you are Great Pan, who only pretended to die. Whatever, you will have sufficient funds and a supply of heavy equipment which will be sent this year—and lots of forms for requisitioning more from the Shtigo Foundation. So go thou and be thou fruitful and multiply, and reinherit the Earth. The gens will be around watching. Cry out if you need help, and help will be forthcoming.

"I don't have time to write you a book. Sorry. Here is my autograph, anyhow:

—Cort Myshtigo

"P.S. I still dunno if it's art. Go to hell yourself."

That is the gist of it.

Pan?

Machines don't talk that way, do they?

I hope not, anyhow . . .

The Earth is a wild inhabitation. It is a tough and rocky place. The rubbish will have to be cleared, section by section, before some anti-rubbish can be put up.

Which means work, lots of it.

Which means I'll need all the Office facilities as well as the Radpol organization, to begin with.

We have money now, and we own our own property again, and that makes a big difference. Maybe even Returnism isn't completely dead. If there is a vital program to revive the Earth, we may draw back some of the ex-pop, may snag some of the new tourists.

Or, if they all want to remain Vegans, they can do that, too. We'd like them, but we don't need them. Our Outbound immigration will be dropping off, I feel, once people know they can get ahead here; and our population will increase more than just geometrically, what with the prolonged fertility period brought on by the now quite expensive S-S series. I intend to socialize S-S completely. I'll do it by putting George in charge of a Public Health program, featuring mainland clinics and offering S-S all over the place.

We'll make out. I'm tired of being a gravekeeper, and I don't really want to spend from now till Easter cutting through the Tree of the World, even if I am a Darkborn with a propensity for trouble. When the bells do ring, I want to be able to say, "Alethos aneste," Risen Indeed, rather than dropping my saw and running (*ring-a-ding*, the bells, *clackety-clack*, the hooves, etcetera). Now is the time for all good kallikanzaroi . . . You know.

So . . .

Cassandra and I have this villa on the Magic Island. She likes it

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here. I like it here. She doesn't mind my indeterminate age anymore. Which is fine.

Just this early morning, as we lay on the beach watching the sun chase away stars, I turned to her and mentioned that this is going to be a big, big ulcer-giving job, full of headaches and such.

"No, it isn't," she replied.

"Don't minimize what is imminent," I said. "It makes for incompatibility."

"None of that either."

"You are too optimistic, Cassandra."

"No. I told you that you were heading into danger before, and you were, but you didn't believe me then. This time I feel that things should go well. That's all."

"Granting your accuracy in the past, I still feel you are underestimating that which lies before us."

She rose and stamped her foot.

"You *never* believe me!"

"Of course I do. It just happens that this time you're wrong, dear."

She swam away then, my mad mermaid, out into the dark waters. After a time she came back.

"Okay," she said, smiling, shaking down gentle rains from her hair. "Sure."

I caught her ankle, pulled her down beside me and began tickling her.

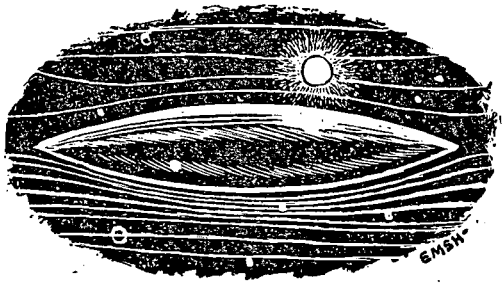
"Stop that!"

"Hey, I believe you, Cassandra! Really! Hear that? Oh, how about that? I really believe you. Damn! You sure are right!"

"You are a smart-alecky kallikanz—ouch!"

And she was lovely by the seaside, so I held her in the wet, till the day was all around us, feeling good.

Which is a nice place to end a story, *sic*:.

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*Sasha Gilien has a fine knack for translating life's mysterious processes into the world of memos and machinery, papers and pettifoggery. Remember TWO'S A CROWD (July, 1962) which reduced birth, adolescence and lunacy to their simplest and funniest fractions? Here, Mr. Gilien opens our eyes to the enigma of Death—or (more in context) to the details of processing out.*

# EL NUMERO UNO

**by Sasha Gilien**

YOU'VE GOT THOSE WHO LIKE the bullfights and those who don't. I'm one of the latter, and if it had been up to me, I wouldn't have been remotely near Tijuana's Plaza de Toros that Sunday afternoon. Unfortunately, I hadn't been in the Bureau long enough to pick my spots, so when I received the manila envelope with the papers from Fogarty's office, there was nothing for it but to get down there and make the best of things. I picked myself a good ten-dollar seat on the shady side of the arena and read a copy of *Deportes* until the program began. I didn't know a damned thing about El Gitano, the guy I was supposed to deliver the papers to, except what had been filled in on the subpoena. *Lauro Cruz-Aguirre, b. an Juan de Mixtopec, Guerrero, Mexico, a. 27, m. Cecilia Dorotea Aguirre, 2 children, r. Roman Catholic.* After "Time and Date of Expiration, the office had typed in "5:48 p.m. Sept. 18, 1964." Which figured that it should be sometime after El Gitano's first bull, probably in the infirmary.

The critic on *Deportes* seemed to think a lot of El Gitano, ranking him almost up there with the big ones. ". . . he kills impeccably, superbly, with an artistry and



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grace solidly founded on an inexhaustible well of bravery . . ." he wrote in that florid Spanish that tickles the aficionado. As far as I'm concerned, it's all a lot of noise to cover up a blood-thirsty and unsportsmanlike show; I never could appreciate cruelty to dumb animals. Anyhow, the critic went on to deplore the fact that El Gitano was fighting in Tijuana for the benefit of a bunch of gringos from Southern California who didn't know one end of a bull from the other. He realized, he said, the phenomenal price the promoters were giving for the fight, but if a man is a true artist he shouldn't prostitute himself, etc. etc. He finished off with a recap of El Gitano's last fight in Argentina, going into ecstasies about ". . . manoletinas, splendid, exquisite ones which sparkled like diamonds —the work of one who is destined to be Numero Uno . . ." Bull!

It was almost five when the music started up and the procession of matadors made its way across the ring. I'll have to admit I got a tingle when the trumpet pierced the air—brazen but melancholy, too. But I wished it were over so I could get back across the border. I had a big week ahead of me; the following night I had to be in Chicago where a promising young welter-weight was going to receive a fatal concussion, and a few days later, a college half-back was going to get his neck broken in a practice scrimmage in Ohio. I'm certainly not complaining of overwork; I like my job, especially since I'm an enthusiastic sports fan, and I get to attend some of the best athletic events in North America. But, as I said, bull-fighting isn't my idea of an athletic event.

My seat was near the little wooden barricade where El Gitano and his assistants stood. They were all wearing practically the same costume, but I could pick him out immediately, the way everyone deferred to him. Besides, he was the one who had the most mournful look. I've been serving papers long enough to identify my man; he's always a trifle uneasier than anyone around. I honestly believe they're somehow vaguely aware that I'm in the audience. Next to me sat a young couple who had obviously driven down from Los Angeles for the fight. The girl was thin and quite pretty,with her hair cut short and straight, and her clothes designed for a peasant with a lot of money. She craned out of her seat to get a better look at El Gitano.

"My God, Harry; look at that face. He's beautiful!"

"That's what courage looks like, kid." Harry had one of those leather udders they use for carrying wine; it was on a strap hanging from his shoulder. He lifted it a few inches from his mouth and squirted a stream of purple. "He's

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going to be another Manolete." He wiped his mouth and leaned across the girl, offering me the wineskin. "A drink from the *bota*, amigo?"

"No thanks," I said coldly, "I don't drink."

"Suit yourself. Ever seen El Gitano fight?"

"No."

"We caught him last year down in Mexico City. The man's a genius. He's going to Spain next; they'll never be able to resist his capework there."

As far as I knew, El Gitano wasn't going to Spain, or anywhere else. He was coming with me. Harry didn't notice that he wasn't talking to a fellow aficionado; he kept on yakking. He was beginning to bore me.

Suddenly the ring was empty and we were all looking at the black gate that said "Toriles". Near it was a slate which had chalked on it, "Angelito. Rancho de San Martin. 495 Kilos." The gate swung open, exposing a patch of darkness, and then the bull—a monster—slammed out and charged across the sand, splintering the wooden fence on the other side.

"My God, Harry," said the girl with a delighted little gasp, "he's a killer."

Down below, El Gitano nodded at one of his men. I heard him say in Spanish, "I want to see how he works, Chico." He was a man with a very dry mouth.

Chico went out trailing a cape. He doubled the beast back and forth a few times while El Gitano leaned on the barrier and studied the scene. Then Chico vaulted the fence, and El Gitano, stiffening, stepped into the ring. The bull stood immobile and after a few seconds of indecision, went for him. I had to give it to the little guy; he had guts, barely moving his skinny legs while the black brute hurtled toward him. He opened his cape and twisted just the tiniest bit to the right, and the animal seemed to wrap himself around him, following the cape like he was glued to it.

Harry and the girl were on their feet bawling, "Ole, ole!" When they sat down Harry shook his head and said, "Did you ever see a *natural* like that?"

"It's so beautiful it makes you want to cry," said the girl. "Pass me the *bota*, Harry."

I looked at my watch. Almost five-thirty. I really should have gotten over to the infirmary to be waiting for him when he got there, but it was fascinating to watch. Even the next part where the picador stuck the bull with a lance. The crowd booed him because he didn't do it right the first time, and eventually he left the field. El Gitano came out again, this time with two brightly colored banderillas which he hooked into Angelito's back. Someone handed him two more, and he neatly placed

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them as the bull roared by. And the third time. The entire arena was still as he stood poised and then it broke into a roar when he remained standing there empty-handed, his back to the bull. He strutted off to get his cape. I hoped nobody would say it was like a ballet.

"It's like a ballet," said the girl.

"A ballet of death, kid." Harry, the philosopher, was a little stoned by now. "Oh God, look at him cite. It's incredible." He stood up and joined the rhythmic cry, "Ole, ole," that swept the crowd every few seconds as El Gitano played with the animal. "Now watch his *estocada,* honey. He's going in straight over that right horn."

And then it happened. The short sword started to sink into Angelito when he suddenly hooked to the right and drove his horn deep into El Gitano's groin. The man literally flew into the air and then tumbled down over the bull's head onto the ground. While he clutched himself, Angelito bore down into him with those enormous horns. The ring filled with men flashing capes, pulling at the bull's tail, pushing his head away. Finally, a few men dragged El Gitano from under him and carried him to the infirmary just as Angelito dropped dead, the sword halfway in him.

When I entered the infirmary, the doctors were slashing off El Gitano's fancy suit and setting up for a transfusion. I pushed my way through the little group around him and held out the papers and a pen. In these cases, the usual procedure is for the consignee to sign the writ and accompany me to the office. I deposit him and the papers with Fogarty who makes the final disposition. The body, of course, remains at the scene of the demise for relatives or other interested parties to do with as they wish.

My station wagon was parked close by, and I was eager to get it over with so I could get back over the border before the Sunday evening traffic exodus began. But things started going wrong immediately. When I identified myself to Aguirre and handed him the pen, instead of taking it and signing, he ignored me. This happens occasionally; people just don't want to believe I've come for them, especially young sports celebrities. So I read him the particulars aloud. ". . . resulting from a rupture of the subcutaneous abdominal arteries, causing a massive hemorrhage . . ." I then read the instructions. ". . . to place yourself in the custody of the duly constituted officer and appear on or before 8:00 p.m., Sunday, September 18, 1964." Still no reaction from Aguirre.

Now, my Spanish isn't perfect, but it's enough to get by, and I've picked up Mexican athletes before —in fact, last year I served papers

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on a soccer player who got kicked in the head in Guadalajara; he even complimented me on my accent. So it wasn't that Aguirre didn't understand me; he was being obstinate. I had the annoying suspicion that in some dumb Indian way he was aware of Paragraph XII, Subsection 5 of the Code. Fortunately for us at the Bureau, not many people are aware of it, and so when an officer appears with his badge and all the official-looking papers, they come along peacefully in face of what seems to be the awful majesty of the law. If they took the trouble to read the small print, they'd see that Paragraph XII, Subsection 5, gives *some* of them a loop-hole. Buried in a tangle of legal verbiage it states that no one is actually required to give himself up if he can produce a good enough cause for remaining alive. Of course, most people never bother to read the Code—as a matter of fact it's surprising how many are content, even delighted to sign the writ. As for those few cranks who do take advantage of Paragraph XII, they get a hearing, and on rare occasions even have their appeal granted. But it's a lot of trouble for everyone, and one of these days we're going to get rid of that little snag which was written into the Code a couple of thousand years ago by a handful of bleeding hearts and fuzzy thinkers.

But in the meantime, here I was with orders to bring Aguirre in and he didn't seem to be having any. I tried again.

"Senor Aguirre, would you please sign the papers, and let's go."

One of the men came in with the ears and tail of Angelito which had been awarded to El Gitano by the judges. He looked at them and then turned to me. "I'm all right, Senor. I want to stay here."

"What's that got to do with it? I showed you the papers, didn't I?"

"You showed me *nada!* You read me something from a paper. What do I care about that?"

"How is he?" asked a worried man I took to be El Gitano's manager.

One of the doctors said in a low voice, "The shock is very great. He is in a deep coma; I'm afraid to move him, but we must get him to a hospital." He nodded at the two men with a stretcher; they lifted the matador tenderly onto it. That was when I grabbed Aguirre.

"Now wait a minute, Mister, you just can't ignore these papers. There are severe penalties."

"Let me see them."

I handed him the papers, confident he wouldn't be able to make any sense out of them. After all, he'd been a poor boy who'd gotten only through the third grade of a little rural school. But I'll be damned if he didn't lie there and go over them word for word. It was an effort; he couldn't do it without

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moving his lips. After a while he looked up and said what I was afraid he would. "It says here I can stay if I've got a good reason."

I brushed that aside. "Listen, Senor Aguirre, it just means a lot of extra red tape. Your time's come and that's all there is to it."

"It says I can stay," he repeated stubbornly. "I've got a good reason; soon I'm going to be El Numero Uno in the corridas."

"Why don't you be reasonable? We're going to get you sooner or later. Besides, I'm not sure being Numero Uno or whatever you call it is good enough."

"It's good enough for me."

I was trying to hang onto my temper. I pulled the papers out of his hand. "OK, pal, but if you think just because you want to stand out there and stick a sword into a few more bulls, you've got any right to stay here, you're wrong as hell."

He shrugged and leaned back in the body in the stretcher. I walked alongside it as it was carried out the door. "Believe my, my friend, if you come with me right now you won't regret it. I can't make any promises, but you've got a good record and I'll be glad to put in a good word for you. It's very likely you'll get sent to—the right place. You know what I mean? Once you've had a taste of that you'll thank me for getting you there."

He sat up and looked right at me. "Senor, you don't understand what it is to be Numero Uno. Especially for me, a poor *muchacho* from the South who was nothing—less than nothing. Now I have a beautiful wife, an aristocrat, and our children—ah, never mind, you wouldn't understand what I mean. I'm sorry; I want to stay."

I put the papers back in my pocket. "If that's the way you want it. But you'll hear from us; we're not through with you."

Aguirre nodded wearily and I heard the doctor say, "He seems to be responding a little."

Naturally, old man Fogarty was furious. Not that he shouted or anything like that. He just looked at me in his dusty Civil Service way and said, "Of course you understand it reflects on everybody in this office." What he meant was that it reflected on him, and that maybe his four decades of seniority wouldn't protect him from an unpleasant—but totally ineffectual—memo from his supervisor.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Fogarty. I carried out my duties to the letter. It wasn't my fault that—"

He wasn't even listening to me. Instead, he read over the writ and then took a pad out of his desk drawer. "Well, let's not talk about it anymore. I'll simply put in Aguirre's request for an appeal." He shook his head mournfully. "They won't like it. It doesn't look good when they get appeals." His voice was accusing.

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"I'd like to assure you that I didn't bring Paragraph XII to his attention, Mr. Fogarty. It's just that he stood on his rights and—"

"Of course." He kept writing and then looked up at me with an expression on his juiceless face which distinctly said I was one of those crackpots who was in *favor* of Paragraph XII.

"Is it all right if I go now, Mr. Fogarty? I haven't had a chance to get dinner yet."

"Yes, you can go. We're getting the papers ready for Clarence Taylor. You can pick them up tomorrow just before you leave for Chicago." He paused. "I hope you don't have any trouble with *him*. Meanwhile, Mr. Aguirre will be held on suspension until some action is taken on his appeal. Let's wish for your sake that they turn him down."

I left the office wondering what the hell he meant by *that* remark. One of the nice things about Civil Service is that Fogarty could never fire me; I had tenure. But he did have the power to transfer me to another section, which I wouldn't like at all. Being attached to Sports, North American District, is the plum job in the whole Bureau—nobody works too hard and there's all the excitement and glamor of the sports world. Naturally, the guys who work in dreary sections like Auto Accident or Old Age envy us and would just love to switch places at the first opportunity. Old Fogarty knows this and uses it to keep us in line. I walked to the cafeteria hoping El Gitano would get turned down cold.

Fogarty's secretary—she's been in the Bureau almost as long as he has—gave me one of her sour looks as she handed me the envelope for Taylor. I signed for it and took off for Chicago, feeling a little apprehensive. When I got to the stadium, the last prelim had begun, so I read the sports section of the Trib until the main event. The columnists seemed to like Taylor that night and saw a bright future for him, completely unaware that his career was going to end abruptly in the middle of the sixth. A little headline at the bottom of the page caught my eye. "MATADOR NEAR DEATH IN MEXICO." The story was datelined Tijuana. *"Mexico's most promising bullfighter, Lauro Aguirre (El Gitano), gored here Sunday, remains unconscious for the third consecutive day. Doctors report that while his condition is considered extremely serious, he clings tenaciously to life . . ."* It was obvious that Aguirre's appeal was still before the Board. Three days already; that wasn't so good. They usually turn them down within a matter of hours.

It was a good fight with both boys showing lots of power, but I couldn't enjoy it. When the sixth came around, Taylor caught one

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on the temple, staggered and dropped. By the time he reached the canvas he was limp. I climbed in through the ropes while everyone was milling around and presented him with the papers. He was very nice about it.

"Jus' gimme the pen, Mister; I'll sign them papers. C'n I say goo'by to my manager?"

"Sure, go ahead, Clarence."

As they lifted the body onto a stretcher, Taylor opened his eyes briefly and mumbled, "So long, Jimmy . . ."

The stocky little Negro who was leaning over him clutched his hand. You're gonna be all right, kid; you're gonna be all right . . ."

Fogarty wasn't in his office when I brought Taylor in, which I thought was odd. He's usually there to fuss over the consignee, checking the papers and stamping everything with his signature. Instead, Thelma the secretary was sitting at his desk. I turned the fighter over to her and she methodically went about processing him while I stood around waiting for her to get through so she could give me the final details on my next pick-up. When she finished with Taylor she buzzed for a clerk who came in and led him out.

"Where's Fogarty?" I asked.

"Mr. Fogarty's in a meeting." She had a smug look on her face. "He asked me to give you this."

She handed me a flimsy which I recognized at once as the carbon copy of a transfer order. He'd done it, all right; I'd been shifted to Auto Accident as of that evening. Naturally, Fogarty didn't want to be around to hear me protest.

"I'd like to know what this is all about, Thelma. I haven't got any black marks on my record. Why am I being sent to Auto?"

"It has nothing to do with your record. I suppose Mr. Fogarty thought you'd be more—" she gave me a complacent little smile—"effective there."

"What kind of boloney is that?"

Her face hardened. "Please don't argue with *me*, Mr. Krantz. I had nothing to do with it. You can clear out your locker any time you want. You're supposed to check in at Auto tomorrow morning. They're expecting you."

"Did it have anything to do with Aguirre?"

"I really wouldn't know." The woman was infuriating. "But I'll tell you this; Senor Aguirre was granted an appeal this evening on the grounds outlined in Paragraph XII. Mr. Fogarty was understandably upset—this hasn't happened in our department for I don't know how many years. It doesn't do us any good, you know; we should try to keep the Section's record good downtown."

All this with an accusing look. Good old Civil Service; nobody wants to be responsible for anything, so it's pass the hot potato

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around. This time they were handing it to me.

No use arguing with Thelma, so I left the office, still boiling inside. I couldn't understand how Aguirre had gotten off—unless there was someone on the Board who had a thing for bullfighting. Someone who went for all that stuff about it being an Art, and a Symbol of Truth, and the rest of it. Funny thing, I had no hard feelings toward Aguirre; in fact, I admired his guts. Now that I was out of it, I really hoped he'd make Numero Uno.

After three weeks in Auto Accident, I was ready to quit and take the test for Post Office Clerk, or something equally exciting. For one thing, Auto is always understaffed, and at the end of a shift you really know you've been working. There'd be twelve, fifteen pickups a day, and when you weren't actually serving the papers and delivering, you'd be standing on dismal stretches of highway, or under a lamp-post on some cold street, waiting for the thing to happen. And the blood and gore, the cracked windshields, the police putting out flares, the white-faced survivors, if any, in shock. Just plain hack-work and very unpleasant.

But that wasn't bad enough. Once they found out I spoke Spanish, they ticketed me for Mexico where the casual attitude toward traffic laws results in an endless massacre. They have some beauties down there, believe me; whole buses full of people careening down sides of mountains, sports cars bashing into cattle, everything. I was getting sick of the whole business; I had to hustle so fast that half the time I didn't get a chance to look over the papers for each day's assignments. Every morning the clerk in the office would hand me a bundle of envelopes and a list of locations and times, and I'd whip down there, barely managing to get it all done before I checked in for the last time. Too bad they weren't paying me by the head; I could retire.

I was seriously considering the possibility of transferring to War Casualty. That's the biggest section in the Bureau, with a whole building to itself. Right now there were hundreds of people sitting around just twiddling their thumbs, and new ones constantly being hired. At the moment there's hardly enough work for more than a handful of employees who spend most of their time in exotic places like Viet Nam and the Congo. I figure it's the Supervisor there trying to build himself an empire in the Bureau—the more people you've got under you, the bigger man you are. Either that, or they're expecting a lot of activity shortly, and they don't want to be caught shorthanded.

So there I was, five kilometers out of Mexico City, trying to keep

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dry in a soggy drizzle while I waited for my last consignee of the day. Then it was home and a comforting highball, a quiet dinner, and off to bed to rest up for the next day's hassle. I was just taking the papers out of the envelope to see who I had coming up, when a big Diesel loomed around the curve and came toward me. I glanced at the sign on the side of the rig, "Hnos. Lopez, Transportes." Another truckdriver, what a bore. I was getting ready for him to jack-knife, but instead, a bright blue Cadillac roared out of nowhere and crunched head on into him. I waited for the glass to stop flying and hurried over to the Caddy, papers in hand. It was clear that it wasn't the truckdriver for whom I'd been sent.

The man and the woman in the mashed up Caddy lay still and twisted. She was going to be all right—I had no papers for her. I peered into the car and tapped the man on the shoulder, and when he turned around, who should it be but my old friend Aguirre.

"Oh, no, not again," I thought. My luck to run into a troublemaker twice in a row.

He smiled up at me and said, "Senor, you are very persistent."

"So are you. I don't want to give you a hard time or anything, Aguirre, but I'd like you to know that I caught hell because of you."

"I am sorry for that. But my reason was good; was it not?"

"For God's sake, you're not going to start that again, are you?"

He shook his head. "No, not any more. Shall we go?"

I helped him up out of the wreckage and we stood there looking at each other.

Finally, I said, "Frankly, Aguirre, I don't get you. After all that trouble you went through with the Board and all that for another chance, here you are taking it so lightly. It's almost as if you're glad to see me."

He laughed. "Yes, I won the fight with your Board, but I lost something else; something more important."

"Oh?"

"My courage. I fought again last week, and I had *nada.* Nothing! I was afraid. And the bulls knew it; they always do. The judges, they know, too." He laughed a short bitter laugh. "Lauro Cruz-Aguirre, El Numero Uno." Suddenly he grasped my hand and shook it. "Senor, believe me, I am so glad you are here with your papers."

I smiled. "It's my pleasure. Just sign by this little 'x' and once more on this page, and everything will be in order."

He signed the papers and gave a lingering look at the beautiful young woman who was starting to stir in the car. "She'll be well taken care of; the little ones, too," he said softly." And then, "Come, Senor, why are we waiting?"

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We got into the station wagon and headed for the office. When we got there, we shook hands again and I directed him to the proper line. All of a sudden I felt proud of myself, and strangely enough, proud of the whole Civil Service. Maybe we're not as efficient as private enterprise, and we're underpaid and all that, but damn it, one way or another, we get the job done.

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SCIENCE EDITOR'S NOTE: "EXCLAMATION POINT" JULY 1965

As usual, my mathematical articles draw a great many letters and, also as usual, I manage to make mistakes. Some are arithmetical so that my evaluation of the Asimov Series toward the end of EXCLAMATION POINT! (July 1965) is slightly wrong in the farther decimal places. That I can be philosophical about.

But, heaven help me, in a moment of sheer chaotic madness, I worked out the number of bridge hands by dividing 52! by (4 x 13!) instead of by $(13!)^4$. The total number is actually 54,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000; a considerably smaller value than the one I gave. It is still a sizable number, however, for you can play a trillion games a second for a billion years without repeating a single game.

The Asimov Series is, as I was certain, no true discovery, for as one Gentle Reader told me, ever so Gently, it is routinely dealt with in second semester calculus or thereabouts.

Several other pretty versions of the Series were suggested. My own version was: $1/2! - 3/4! - 5/6! - 7/8! - 9/10! \ldots$ but it does not contain (as I mistakenly said it did) minus signs only. The first term is $+ 1/2!$ even though the positive sign is not written.

To get round that some readers suggested the series be written: $- (-1)/0! - 1/2! - 3/4! \ldots$ All the terms would then indeed be negative, even the first, but we would have to step outside the realm of the natural numbers to include 0 and $-1$, which detracts a bit from the austere beauty of the series.

Another suggested alternative is: $0/1! + 2/3! + 4/5! + 6/7! + 8/9! \ldots$ which also gives $1/e$. It includes only positive signs which are prettier (in my opinion) than negative signs but, on the other hand, it includes 0.

Still another reader suggested a similar series for $e$ itself; one that goes as follows: $2/1! + 4/3! + 6/5! + 8/7! + 10/9! \ldots$ The inversion of the order of the natural numbers detracts from its orderliness but it gives it a certain touch of charming grace, doesn't it?

Oh, if only mathematics loved me as I love her!

—ISAAC ASIMOV

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SCIENCE

# SQU-U-U-USH!

by Isaac Asimov

ANYONE WHO LIKES TO SLIP HIS imagination off its leash and let it roam freely is bound to find it hunting down extremes with the greatest abandon. At least, it is so in the case of my own imagination (which, at the best of times, is held back only by a rather badly ravelled piece of string).

At various times, in these monthly essays, I have tried to track down the most instantaneous instant*, the most infinite infinity**, the hottest heat***, the coldest cold**** and so on. Now I am impelled to track down the densest density into its (as we shall see) rather glamorous lair.

To begin at the beginning, we can consider the substances that exist under ordinary conditions on Earth. As I said in TO TELL A CHEMIST (May 1965), the densest normal substance is the inert metal, osmium.

The density of any substance is the mass of a given volume of that substance under fixed environmental conditions. At ordinary temperatures and pressures a cubic centimeter of osmium has a mass of 22.5 grams. Its density is therefore 22.5 grams per cubic centimeter.

To make use of common units, a cubic inch of osmium has a mass of 13 ounces. Its density, therefore, is also 13 ounces per cubic inch.

This is quite dense. Imagine a brick-shaped object of 2 inches by 4 inches by 8 inches. If it were an ordinary brick, its mass would be in

* *ULTIMATE SPLIT OF THE SECOND, August 1959*
** *VARIETIES OF THE INFINITE, September 1959*
*** *THE HEIGHT OF UP, October 1959*
**** *THE ELEMENT OF PERFECTION, November 1960*



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the neighborhood of 4.5 pounds. If it were made of solid, pure osmium, it would weigh about 52 pounds (and be worth about $120,000, though that is neither here nor there).

Suppose, then, that instead of measuring still more extreme densities in grams per cubic centimeter or ounces per cubic inch, we measure it in terms of "osmium units" (a term I have just invented myself and take full responsibility for) and abbreviate that as "o.u.". All we need do is remember that 1 o.u. is equal to 13 ounces per cubic inch or 22.5 grams per cubic centimeters and we can easily make the conversion into common units or metric units if we wish.

And the use of o.u. gives us the benefit of a bit of drama. Any material with a density of 2 o.u. is, we see at once, twice as dense as the densest material we can ever encounter under ordinary conditions.

How can we have a material that is denser than the densest substance that exists? Remember that I gave the density of osmium "at ordinary temperatures and pressures" as the "fixed environmental conditions." Since density is the ratio of mass to volume, we can increase density by changing the environmental conditions in such a way as to raise the value of the mass, lower that of the volume, or both.

By setting an object into motion relative to ourselves, we can (Einstein's theory tells us) both increase the mass and decrease the volume. If a one-inch cube of osmium sped past us at a velocity of 80,000 miles a second, we would find that its length in the direction of light would be reduced to 0.9 inches and its volume, therefore, to 0.9 cubic inches. Its mass would be increased to 14.3 ounces and its density would therefore become 1.22 o.u.

This is not much of an increase in density considering the enormous task of setting a cubic inch of osmium into motion at half the velocity of light. And at all ordinary velocities, the change in mass and volume of any object is negligible. Let's forget velocity, therefore.

If we deal with an object at rest, there is no way of increasing the mass, but there are two ways of decreasing the volume. We can lower the temperature or we can raise the pressure.

As far as lowering the temperature is concerned, there is a stern limit set for us—that of absolute zero, which is only about 300 Centigrade degrees below room temperature. Unfortunately, the decrease in volume of solids with drop in temperature is quite small and 300 degrees does little. From the figures available to me, I estimate that a mass of osmium taking up 1 cubic inch at room temperature would

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take up 0.994 cubic inches at absolute zero. The density would rise to 1.006 o.u., which is an increase not worth dealing with.

That leaves us with pressure. Physicists have learned to produce pressures in the range of hundreds of tons per square inch. This is enough to distort atomic structure and force atoms to occupy a smaller volume than normal.

Some solids are more compressible than others. For instance, cesium, the most compressible solid available to experimenters, can be squashed down to a volume less than half normal. The most incompressible substance, diamond, can be reduced in volume only by a couple of percent. I have come across no record of osmium itself being put under high pressure, but if we assume that its volume can be reduced by 10 percent, then its density would move up to 1.11 o.u.

Of course, we need not confine ourselves to man-made pressures only. The universe has examples of naturally-occurring pressures far higher than anything the laboratory can produce. The center of any sizable astronomic body is under extreme pressure due to its own gravitational field. The center of the Earth, for instance, must bear the gravitationally-induced weight of its own vast mass.

One calculation places the pressure at the center of the Earth at as high as 4,000,000 atmospheres. Since the pressure of 1 atmosphere is 14.7 pounds per square inch, the pressure at the center of the Earth may be as high as 30,000 tons per square inch.

The average density of the Earth as a whole is 0.244 o.u. The density of the rocks on Earth's surface, however, averages at merely about 0.125 o.u. This light crust is balanced by a dense center—not surprisingly, in view of the great central pressures. The density of the material at the very center of the Earth is estimated to be as high as 0.800 o.u.

This is less dense than osmium, but the material at Earth's center is a nickel-iron alloy which, under ordinary conditions, has a density of merely 0.350 o.u. In other words, the material in the Earth's center, though much less compressible than cesium, has been squashed to something more than twice its normal density. If we assume that osmium is about as compressible as nickel-iron, then we might expect a sample of solid osmium to achieve a density of 2.0 o.u. if it were transported intact to the Earth's center.

It so happens that a normal atom is mostly empty space. Roughly speaking, an atom has a diameter of about $10^{-8}$ centimeters, and con-

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tains a nucleus (possessing nearly all the mass of the atom) with a diameter of about $10^{-12}$ centimeters.

These nuclei, which are the great contributors to the density of any substance, are held apart at distances at least 10,000 times their own diameter by a thinly-spread-out organization of electrons (with very little mass) in the outer reaches of the atom.

As pressure increases, the electrons give until finally, their organization breaks down altogether. This breakdown of electron organization has been calculated as taking place when pressures of 750,000 tons per square inch are reached. This is a pressure 25 times as great as that at the center of the Earth. The pressure at the center of a planet like Jupiter, over 300 times as massive as the Earth, must approach this figure so that it is sometimes said that Jupiter is almost the largest chunk of normal matter that can exist.

Once the electron organization collapses through pressure, then neighboring nuclei can approach each other much more closely. A given mass is then confined in a much smaller volume and the density shoots up tremendously. Matter made up of atoms in which the electron organization has broken down is referred to as "degenerate matter."

It would appear that an object must have a mass about ten times that of Jupiter before it reaches central temperatures great enough to ignite thermonuclear reactions and thus becomes a star. A body this large would surely have central pressures great enough to break down the electron organization of atoms. We can suppose, therefore, that any star must have a degenerate core.

Consider the Sun, for instance. It is made up almost entirely of hydrogen and helium, which are the least dense of all the ordinary forms of matter. Solid hydrogen has a density of about 0.03 o.u, while solid helium has a density of about 0.06 o.u.

These solids are solids only at extremely low temperatures, however. At ordinary temperatures and pressures, they are gases, with densities of about 0.000004 and 0.000008 o.u. respectively. At the temperature of the Sun's surface (but at ordinary pressure) the densities would be 0.0000002 and 0.0000004 o.u.; and at the temperature of the Sun's center (but still at ordinary pressure) it would be about 0.0000000001 and 0.0000000002 o.u.

In actual fact, the average density of the Sun is 0.063 o.u. This is not a high density by ordinary standards, being only 1.4 times that of water, but considering the constitution and temperature of the Sun, it is tremendously high; millions of times as high as it "ought" to be.

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The answer is to be found in the vast pressures that compress the unbelievably hot hydrogen and helium to the point where the electron organization breaks down.

It is estimated that at the center of the Sun, the temperature is about 15,000,000° K., and the density is just about 4 o.u. This central core of the Sun (consisting almost entirely of helium) is the densest material that exists in the Solar system.

There is, however, a vast Universe outside the Solar system. There are stars that consist almost entirely of degenerate matter and that have densities which, even on the average, are considerably higher than the maximum density of the Sun's center. Because they are small, and yet white hot, they are called "white dwarfs."

Only about 100 white dwarfs are known altogether. This small number is delusive. White dwarfs are so low in total luminosity that they must be quite close to our Solar system to be seen at all. From the number that do exist in our own stellar neighborhood, however, it can be estimated that as many as 3 percent of all stars are white dwarfs which would mean 4,000,000,000 of them in our own Galaxy alone.

This is not surprising since the white dwarf may well be a terminal stage in the evolution of almost all stars. The brighter the star, the sooner it reaches that terminal. In another five billion years, perhaps, all stars existing today that are brighter than the Sun will have become white dwarfs. (That does not necessarily mean that no bright stars will be left because many more will have come into existence in the meantime.)

The first white dwarf to be discovered, and the best known, is Sirius B, the companion of the bright star, Sirius. It has a mass about equal to that of our Sun, but a diameter of about 30,000 miles, so that it is about the size of the planet, Uranus. Its *average* density is about 1,500 o.u. A cubic inch of Sirius B would have a mass of 0.6 tons. Instead of having merely a degenerate core, as the Sun does, Sirius B is nearly all degenerate, with only a thin outer shell, a few hundred miles thick, of ordinary matter.

Sirius B is, however, rather a mild case of a white dwarf. In general, white dwarfs are more tightly packed and denser than Sirius B. One estimate places the average density of an average white dwarf at about 15,000 o.u., or ten times that of Sirius B. A cubic inch of average white dwarf material would then have a mass of 6 tons.

The smallest white dwarf yet discovered ("Luyton's star", if we wish to use the name of the discoverer) is only 1700 miles in diameter—

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less than that of our Moon. It has a volume only 1/100 that of the Earth, yet it has an estimated mass equal to at least half that of our Sun. Its density would then be about 4,000,000 o.u. and a cubic inch of its material would have a mass of about 1600 tons.

We are dealing here with large densities indeed, yet we are nowhere near the ultimate squ-u-u-ush.

Suppose we consider Luyton's star in more detail. If it has a mass equal to half that of the Sun, then its mass must be just about $10^{30}$ kilograms. The mass of a nucleon (that is, a proton or a neutron) is about $1.67 \times 10^{-27}$ kilograms, so that Luyton's star must contain about $6 \times 10^{56}$ nucleons.

The diameter of Luyton's star is 1700 miles or $2.74 \times 10^{8}$ centimeters. The volume of Luyton's star, therefore, comes to $1.08 \times 10^{25}$ cubic centimeters.

If we divide $1.08 \times 10^{25}$ (the volume of the star) by $6 \times 10^{56}$ (the number of its nucleons) we find that each nucleon has, on the average, a space of $1.8 \times 10^{-32}$ cubic centimeters in which to knock about.

This is a tiny space if you look upon it as a hundred-millionth the volume taken up by an ordinary atom here on Earth. Nevertheless, it is about a hundred million times as voluminous as the actual volume of the individual nucleon itself. In other words, even Luyton's star is almost entirely empty space!

To indicate how empty it is, we can say that at any given instant, neighboring nucleons in Luyton's star will be separated by distances of about 500 times their own diameter. If we built a structure of one-inch cubes and had each cube placed 42 feet from its neighbor, we would rightly consider our structure to be a very loose one indeed and to consist mostly of empty space.

What keeps a white dwarf from collapsing further than it does? Well, it doesn't consist of nucleons only, but of electrons as well. The electrons are no longer organized as in ordinary atoms but exist as a kind of dense "electron gas." The nucleons could be squashed together and be held together by the strong nuclear force (see BEHIND THE TEACHER'S BACK, August 1965) but electrons can only repel each other and the closer they are forced together the more strongly they repel each other.

There is then a balance between two opposing forces. There is gravitation (and nuclear force) tending to collapse a white dwarf and a powerful electron repulsion tending to expand it. An equilibrium is reached at a point depending a great deal on the total mass of the

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star. All things being equal the greater the mass of a white dwarf, the greater the gravitational force compressing it and the smaller it is.

A crucial point is reached at a mass equal to 1.44 times that of the Sun. (This was first pointed out by the Indian-American astronomer, Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar, and is therefore called "Chandrasekhar's limit.") Above that mass, the gravitational force would overcome the greatest possible electron repulsion and a white dwarf as we know it could not exist.

As early as 1934, the Swiss-American astronomer, Fritz Zwicky, pointed out what might happen if Chandrasekhar's limit were exceeded. Electrons forced against protons (the two are present in equal quantities) would form neutrons. These, added to the neutrons already present, would build up a structure consisting of virtually nothing but neutrons. We would have a "neutron star."

Such a neutron star, unsupported by electron gas, would collapse until all empty space was gone. Much of the star may be blown away in the supernova explosion but in the end a mass the size of the Sun might be packed into a sphere with a diameter of no more than 10 miles.

The density of such a neutron star would equal about 50,000,000,000,000 o.u. It would be about 12,500,000 times as dense as Luyton's star, and a cubic inch of the "neutronium" from a neutron star would have a mass of 20,000,000,000 tons. Not bad!

Surrounding the 10-mile-thick neutronium core of such a neutron star there would be (according to some calculations) a shell about half a mile thick made up of ordinary white-dwarf matter, and surrounding that an outermost shell of ordinary matter, about 12 feet thick!

Do such neutron stars actually exist? It is not certain.

One estimate I have seen suggests that so far in the lifetime of our Galaxy 100,000,000 neutron stars have formed. If that is so, there is an even chance that one such star is within 100 light-years of us. However, if an object ten miles across were merely to radiate light it could not be seen unless it were very close indeed—say within the Solar system.

It could radiate more than light, though. It has been calculated that when a neutron star is first formed, the neutronium core is at a temperature of 5,000,000,000° K and that it takes a thousand years for it to cool to 500,000,000° K. In all this time, the thin layer of ordinary matter around the star has an outer surface that remains at 10,000,000° K. and radiates x-rays.

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This, now, is a different situation. X-rays are much more energetic than light and can be much more easily detected in feeble doses. For the first thousand years of its existence, then, a neutron star can be detected. After that its radiation fades into the soft x-rays and hard ultra-violet and is lost. Assuming that a neutron star forms each century, on the average, there may be as many as 10 neutron stars still in their x-ray infancy and still detectable as "x-ray stars."

Actually, a rocket launched on April 29, 1963, did detect two x-ray sources in the sky—one from the Crab Nebula and one, eight times as intense, from a spot in the constellation of Scorpius.

The Crab Nebula is considered to be the remnant of a super-nova, the light of the explosion of which reached us nearly a thousand years ago. Could a neutron star be lurking there?

Well, the Moon occasionally occults the Crab Nebula. If a neutron really exists there, the Moon should move across it in a split-second and the x-rays should be cut off all at once. If the x-rays originate in a source other than a neutron star, that source may be wide indeed and the Moon would cut across it—and cut off the x-rays —only gradually.

On July 7, 1964, the Moon crossed the Crab Nebula and a rocket was sent up to take measurements (the x-rays won't penetrate the atmosphere and must be detected in space). Alas, the x-rays cut off gradually. The x-ray source is about a light-year across and is no neutron star. (What is it instead? Nobody knows.)

What about the Scorpius x-ray star? What about others that have recently been detected? Neutron stars? It looks bad. In early 1965 physicists at C. I. T. recalculated the cooling rate of a neutrino star, taking into account the effect of neutrino loss (see HOT STUFF, July 1962). They decided it would cool off so rapidly that it would radiate x-rays for only a matter of weeks. The chance that even a single neutron star was formed in the Galaxy with radiation reaching us in the last couple of weeks is virtually nil.

Let's, however, play around with neutron stars anyway. Whether they actually exist or not, speculation remains legal—and fun.

What about its surface gravity, for instance? We can consider four bodies: the Earth, the Sun, Sirius B, and a neutron star of the type we've just discussed. If we set the surface gravity of the Earth at 1, then the surface gravity of the three other bodies can be easily calculated:

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| | *surface gravity* |
|---|---|
| Earth | 1 |
| Sun | 28 |
| Sirius B | 24,000 |
| Neutron star | 210,000,000,000 |

In a previous article (HARMONY IN HEAVEN, February 1965) I calculated that a planet moving around the Sun while skimming its surface (a "surface planet") would, if atmospheric resistance were neglected, complete its circuit in 2.73 hours and have an orbital velocity of 271 miles per second.

We can use the same sort of calculation to work out the properties of a surface planet for Sirius B and for a neutron star.

For Sirius B, a planet skimming its surface would complete the circuit of the star in exactly 65 seconds and would have to travel at a velocity of 1,450 miles per second. As for the neutron star, a planet skimming its surface would complete a circuit in 1/2500 of a second and would have to travel at a rate of 78,500 miles per second.

If a surface planet were to move at a velocity equal to 1.414 times its velocity in a circular orbit, it would escape altogether from the grip of its star. We can therefore calculate the escape velocity from the surface of our four representative bodies, giving that escape velocity both in miles per second and as a fraction of the velocity of light.

| | *escape velocity* | |
|---|---|---|
| | *miles/second* | *fraction of light velocity* |
| Earth | 7 | 0.000038 |
| Sun | 380 | 0.002 |
| Sirius B | 2,000 | 0.011 |
| Neutron star | 110,000 | 0.59 |

In order for any object, then, to get away from the surface of a neutron star it must be travelling at a velocity equal to about 3/5 that of the velocity of light. The next question is a natural one. What kind of an object would one have to have for the escape velocity from its surface to equal the speed of light?

Well, even pure neutronium would be insufficient and since I consider that the ultimate squ-u-u-ush, it seems to me that nothing could bring about such a situation.

But, again, let's pretend. Suppose we can somehow find a body so sternly compressed that even the neutrons of which it is composed

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are squashed together, forcing the mass of the Sun into a ball 4 miles across.

The density of such a body would be about 310,000,000,000,000 o.u., some 6.25 times that of an ordinary neutron star, and a cubic inch of its substance would have a mass of 125,000,000,000 tons. Its surface gravity would be 1,300,000,000,000 times that of the Earth and, again, 6.25 times that of an ordinary neutron star.

A surface planet of such a "super-neutron star" would make its circuit at a velocity of 131,000 miles a second and complete that circuit in 1/10,000 of a second. The escape velocity from the surface of such a body would be equal to the velocity of light.

Nothing could escape from the surface of such a super-neutron star. Light photons, neutrinos, gravitons (which carry the gravitational force) all travel at only the speed of light and could not escape.

A superneutron star could not, therefore, affect the rest of the Universe in any way. It could give no sign of its existence; neither radiational nor gravitational. It could not lose heat, it could not explode, it could do nothing but remain in perfect stasis.

If we accept Einstein's view of gravitation as representing a geometrical shape of space; so that the fabric of space behaves as though it were curved in the presence of matter, and the more sharply curved the greater the concentration of matter; then a super-neutron star is one in which space has curved itself into a complete sphere. The super-neutron star has been pinched off into a tiny Universe all its own, forever closed and self-sufficient.

For any given mass, the radius of the sphere into which it must be compressed for this to happen is called "Schwarzchild radius" after K. Schwarzchild, a physicist who worried about this sort of thing back in 1916, only a year after Einstein's view of gravitation was published.

Naturally, we could never detect a super-neutron star even if it existed, no matter how close it was. Such a super-neutron star ought, perhaps, to be considered as not part of our Universe and therefore as not located anywhere at all. But even if we could imagine such a star located within the Earth or in a spot partly taken up by our own body, it would mean nothing. The Earth and we ourselves would flow around the object and there would be no way in which we could measure the distortion that would result—and therefore there would *be* no distortion.

Which should, in these wretched days of continual crises and danger, be a great relief to us all.

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*If you started this issue at the beginning, you have already encountered an unusual sort of dog in Roger Zelazny's novel—a quarter-ton animal with a playful passion for lopping off the heads of his master's enemies. Dog lovers may or may not be happy to know that a canine plays a substantial part in the delightful tale below, in which England's John Christopher lifts the veil to give us a glimpse into the world of the homosexual dog. (And you* still *wonder why they're not naming 'em Rover anymore?)*

# A FEW KINDRED SPIRITS

by John Christopher

IN THE ANIMAL CREATION, AS IN the human, there are spheres whose existence remain unsuspected until chance lifts a corner of the veil. One of these, as far as I was concerned, was the world of the homosexual dog. I only became aware of it when Shlobber came into my life.

Shlobber, of course, was a classic text-book case for deviation. Absentee father (admittedly a norm amongst dogs) and most decidedly possessive and domineering mother. She was black-and-white, terrier-type, with admixture of collie and spaniel and more elusive extras, and Shlobber was a child of her one and only litter. The intention was to get rid of all the pups to suitable homes, and this was, in fact, achieved. Shlobber, however, having proved over-boisterous for one of the children in the billet we found him, was brought back with apologies. Only as a transient, we thought, but somehow he stayed. Mother went away to be spayed, returned with joy to find her golden-haired son still on the scene, and launched into that career of aggressive, chivvying affection which determined and characterized their relationship. Hour after hour, day after day, she snapped



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and barked at him, and roughly bowled him over. And he, for his part, was, somewhat resentfully, devoted to her.

His perversity emerged later, and was first apparent when the bitch further up the lane came in season. She was, to human view, an ugly mustard-coloured ill-kempt creature, but as far as dogs were concerned clearly of surpassing attraction. They came, it seemed, from the remotest corners of the island, stampeding through our garden on the way. Shlobber, larger at eighteen months than his mother, romped with her on the lawn, indifferent to all this. So I was not particularly surprised, a few weeks later, when I found him out on his own and making overtures to a male Boxer.

After that the pattern set in firmly, but I still thought of him as exceptional. This remained the case until one day on the beach when he fell in with a roving pack of other dogs. There was a nervous-looking Labrador-cross, a thin white creature with a funny head and popping eyes, a paunchy Spaniel, and a shaggy grey-brown beast at whose origins I could not begin to guess. Shlobber recognized these as soul-mates right away, and bounded off with them along the sands. I whistled him back, and he came slowly and reluctantly. In the afternoon he disappeared, and did not return until late at night.

He remained devoted to Mother when he was at home, but from that point, increasingly, he took to making excursions on his own. A couple of times I saw him on the beach with the same gang. They were at a distance, and I preferred to leave it that way. I did not care to know him when he was in that particular company, and I had the idea he felt the same way. There was no doubt that they were, in the specifically pejorative sense, a queer lot.

The further, and disturbing, insight came one day in early summer, when I had gone to the beach to think out an awkward problem in a story I was writing. My mind often works better on the horizontal, and so I lay on the sand and bent my mental energies to the task. But the characters who were giving trouble were both impossible and dull and, lulled by the sun and the sporific surf of transistor radios, I fell asleep. When I awoke, it was to the familiar bark of a dog—of Shlobber, in fact. Opening my eyes, I saw that he and the gang were not more than twenty yards away. I was about to close them again, in distaste, when something about the waddle of the paunchy Spaniel caught my attention. I looked at him more closely, and thought of Birkinshaw.

As often happens, the donnée of the recognition sparked off others. The thin white one—surely Andrew Stenner? The eyes, I saw

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now, were unmistakeable. And the shaggy grey-brown thing with legs too short for his body. Peter Parsons! The Labrador-cross had the massive yet effeminate build that I remembered in James de Percy. Then who, I wondered, was Shlobber? And, for that matter, where?

Still half asleep, I glanced along the beach. He was there, all right, and so was a dog I had never seen before. A sort of whippet, spotted brown and white. He was smaller and frailer than Shlobber, but he was snapping at his heels with vicious and righteous anger. The anger of the betrayed, not only in friendship but in art. Jonathan Blumstein, to the life, or rather, I thought hazily, to the death.

My mind went back to the old days, to Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, to Munich, to Hutton's triple century at the Oval, to a girl called Gwen. Above all, to the gold and marble decor of the Buckingham. I knew who Shlobber was.

In 1938 I had an indulgent father, a habit of getting my own way, and high ambitions, particularly in relation to the arts. I was a day-boy at a well-known school in London and had decided that, instead of going up to Oxford in the autumn, I would become a writer. At an earlier stage I had written a few things for the school magazine, but all that trivia had now been abandoned. I proposed to write the definitive contemporary novel, which would be scathing and witty, yet profound and all-embracing. I felt that my experience and intuitive understanding went about ninety per cent of the way towards fitting me for this. The remaining ten per cent needed to be acquired. The Buckingham, I thought, famed throughout the world as a Mecca for literary men, was the best place to go to get started on it.

I looked old for my years, and had been brought up in an atmosphere where drinks and restaurants were taken for granted. It took some nerve, all the same, to walk through those wreaths of cigar smoke, to take my place at one of the marble-topped tables on which Whistler had been wont to sketch, to order a Pernod from a gnarled and ancient waiter who had very likely brought champagne to Oscar Wilde. Having got so far, my reserves were exhausted. I sat and clutched my glass and stared frozenly about me. Everyone seemed old and rich and distinguished. And accompanied; only I sat alone.

Aware of my social failings, I took refuge in my art. I carried a small leather-bound notebook in which to jot down observations, descriptions, phrases which might otherwise be lost; and I brought this out and began, defensively, to

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write in it. My self-importance was restored. I sipped my Pernod and launched into a brief but scandalous imaginary biography of the fat woman with diamonds all over her on the other side of the room. Engrossed in this, I only looked up when a figure came between me and the light. I saw a thin man, pop-eyed, with a pale face but a warm smile. He nodded benignly.

"A chiel amang us, takin' notes."

I recognized him, not from his face but from the lilting accent of the Highlands. Andrew Stenner was a public personality in those pre-television days, a giant of radio. Additionally, a bon vivant and skilled water-colourist.

"Ye're a writer, I guess," he said. "Come over and meet Birkinshaw. He needs to be reminded of things—death and the younger generation."

He was a man who had many impulses and frequently acted on them. In this case the motivation was partly amiable, partly malicious. He was perceptive, and had seen, I think, my isolation and shyness, and pitied it. In addition, Birkinshaw, then at the height of his fame as a novelist, had a deeply rooted fear and envy of young writers, which it amused Stenner to exploit. He waved my mild demurrant aside, took my arm firmly, and led me to join the others.

They were all there, that first night. Birkinshaw, Parsons, de Percy, Blumstein and Redehead. Peter Parsons looking unkempt, his hair long and wild, his gaze curiously focussed on nothing, or on the memory of one of those cinema screens at which he spent so much time gazing, preparing his authoritative work on the Film. James de Percy, a stone engraver to be spoken of with Gill, his body huge, hands surprisingly delicate. Jonathan Blumstein, small and nervous, scrawny-necked behind his bow tie, talking, talking, talking. And David Redehead, who had been blonde and handsome and now had thinning hair and a look of failure, listening to all that Jonathan said.

Tongue-tied, I sat even quieter than he did. Under Birkinshaw's frowning stare I drank his champagne—his latest novel was both Literary Guild and Book Society Choice, and we were celebrating the fact—and to myself revelled in the consciousness of being in the company of artistic and distinguished men. In the morning there would be Latin Verse, which I had not prepared. But one lived for the moment, and in this moment one savoured Life.

More than twenty years later, sitting looking out to sea from an island in the Channel, I thought of those days. By the end of the evening, Birkinshaw had gleaned

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that I was raw and respectful, unpublished and unlikely to be published for some time to come. He thawed towards me and when, a few days later, I ventured back to the Buckingham, it was he who called me over. In the months that followed I became, if not an accepted member of the group, at least a kind of mascot, tolerated, encouraged, occasionally allowed to buy a drink. Meeting Peter Parsons at Birkinshaw's funeral, one dripping February day towards the end of the war, I made some remark about this, and he took his mind off composing artistic cinematic frames of the ceremony long enough to toss me an explanation.

"The same—as always." He spoke in clipped, oblique phrases. "You might have been—something—some day. To write about them. Boswell." He gurgled with bitter laughter. "To five moth-eaten Johnsons."

Presumably he excluded the sixth. The great work had never been completed, and the last time I had seen his name it had been on the cover of a badly printed booklet with a lot of fuzzy stills, many of them dealing with the female nude. A sad declension.

So much for my being accepted. The reverse of the coin puzzled me a little, too. Their conversation, apart from being intelligent, was untrammelled, and it did not take many evenings for me to realize that what I had heard rumoured of Birkinshaw and Blumstein was true of them all: they belonged to that freemasonry which comes after the Roman Catholics and neck and neck with Standard Oil. Expecting to be wooed, I had my maidenly refusals ready. But nothing of the sort happened. At the time I gave credit to my own inner purity. Later, though, I guessed the real reason. The qualities which, in their own sex, attracted them were beauty and intelligence. Looking back I sadly understood that I had failed to qualify in either respect.

Whatever had been the case in the past, there was, in fact, only one sexual link operating within the group. Blumstein and Redehead had been living together for a decade and a half in Blumstein's house in Cheyne Walk and their relationship had settled into something resembling a long established and moderately successful marriage. Blumstein had wealth and some talent; he had published three volumes of poetry which, although commercially unsuccessful, had gained him a reputation. Redehead came from a poor family and all he had to his credit were a score or so of little pieces published in little magazines. Belles lettres at their most precious. There had been one slim volume of them published, plainly at Blumstein's expense.

But fifteen years earlier, when they met, Redehead had had some-

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thing else: physical beauty. It was this quality in him to which Blumstein, an ugly little man, had been devoted. And it did not last—by his early thirties, Redehead was growing coarse and fat, and beginning to lose his curly golden hair. The end, according to the cynics, was in sight. Blumstein would ease him out and install a younger, handsomer companion. It did not happen. Blumstein, perhaps, was less deferential, more condescending, than he had been; but he stayed true to his dilapidated sweetheart, and to the memory of his radiance. And Redehead, for his part, was both grateful and devoted. In public, no-one could remember seeing them apart.

As if the past were not rampant enough already, the nearest transistor radio began playing "The Night is Young"; with electrified strings and a coal-heaver's voice, but recognizable. The dogs were in full pelt northwards along the beach, with the pudgy Spaniel, Birkinshaw, waddling ten yards behind the rest. The song was Alice, who came after Gwen and more effectively. And Birkinshaw . . . That evening when I had gone late to the Buckingham, after an hour and a half of waiting for Alice to turn up for a date, and had found him deep in one of his more pompous perorations. Hurt and angry and cynical, I had taken my seat, and Blumstein had waved for the waiter, and Birkinshaw had gone on, and on, and on. He was talking about Time, which he gave the impression of having discovered even before Jack Priestley. It was at once the greatest illusion and the final reality. What had been, would be. All that we might be and love and suffer, we had been and loved and suffered in the past. We had walked the earth, and would walk it again.

"Kindred spirits find each other," he said. "We have sat at wine together under blue Attic skies, celebrating the news from Marathon. One day, perhaps, we shall sit on the moon, bathed in silver earthlight, drinking Martian champagne."

My gorge, disturbed already by the cruelty of Alice, rose. Not this spirit, I thought, and got up rudely while Birkinshaw was still rolling on, and left.

It was a temporary revulsion, provoked by my own heterosexual smart, and but for a couple of things I would probably have gone back the next week. The things were my sense of embarrassment over my abrupt and discourteous departure and, more important, a softening on the part of Alice. The whole of that winter I was her joyful and unhappy slave, with no time or energy to devote either to the Buckingham or literature. My reading was confined, feverishly, to scanning the lists for social

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events that would suit her voracious but fickle taste. I missed the announcement of Blumstein's death. I only accidentally saw the notice of his will when my eye, intent on the theatre advertisements in *The Star*, somehow slipped to the facing page. He had left a very tidy estate—upwards of fifty thousand after duty. There were some minor bequests, to servants and so on. These apart, everything was left to his old friend and companion, David Redehead. With youthful callousness, I mentally wished him well in his widowhood, and returned to the more important matter of finding a show to which I could persuade Alice to let me take her.

Alice's fancy turned with the spring, and this time decisively. She met a Commander R.N. and married him within a month. I think the speed of this, after her prolonged dabbling with me, was the biggest blow to my vanity. Certainly I took it badly. In my misery I went back to the Buckingham, and found them, except for the dead Blumstein, in their accustomed places. They received me with courtesy and amiability but I felt there was constraint—the constraint, perhaps, with which Shlobber's pack might have greeted a dog who had left them to follow a bitch on heat. I had made my difference, my exclusion from the company of kindred spirits, indelicately plain. I noted that Birkinshaw was wheezing more, that Parsons was developing a nervous twitch, and that Redehead, in the flush of wealth and bereavement, was looking ten times better and happier and more confident. I have seen the change in many widows since, but that was the first time. I thought of Alice as a widow, her Commander having gone down with his ship, of her delicate skin and fair silky hair against black satin, and was undone. Bored, and stinging with jealousy and desire, I made brief apologies and left.

It was over a year before I made my next visit, and then in uniform. I had been commissioned in the Royal Artillery in April, and in June was posted to the command of an anti-aircraft battery in, of all places, Hyde Park. I did not care much for what seemed to me the hysteric and self-consciously heroic attitude of London in the summer of Dunkirk, and I headed for the Buckingham as a repository of more permanent values. I found them all there and, as on that very first occasion, celebrating the success of a book. Not Birkenshaw's, though, but Redehead's.

It had been published two days earlier, on a Monday, and, it seemed, ecstatically reviewed the previous day in the two quality Sundays. (I had missed them, sleeping through the day in the aftermath of two night exercises and a Ministerial inspection in

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between.) And these reviews had been effective as well as laudatory. Redehead had lunched with his publisher that day at the Ivy and been told that sales were, for a book of this kind, superb. Belles letters again, but successful belles lettres, belles lettres to which the cognoscenti took off their collective hat. Redehead was flushed with his triumph, but making an endearing effort to be modest about it. We drank '33 Krug, toasting his success with bibulous and, in my case at least, genuinely delighted good will. Even at that early age I had sufficient premonition of the future to find the Cinderella story of success after long years of failure one of my very favorite themes.

A couple of days later I bought the book, and on our next quiet night read it. It was, one might say, a forerunner of Cyril Connolly's "The Unquiet Grave", a series of loosely linked but roughly continuous pieces on Life, on the Human Condition, studded with maxims and epigrams and snatches of poetry. Like Connolly's bored and greedy despair at the war's end, this book, restless for change, optimistic in the face of the threatening gods, gallantly bogus, matched and re-echoed its time. Redehead, I saw, really had done it. He was, at long last, a lion.

I saw them occasionally thereafter, but time and mortality were breaking up the charmed circle... Stenner died of a coronary, a few minutes after ending an uplifting Post-Script to the nine o'clock News. In Italy, three years later, I heard of the death of Redehead, killed when a bomb destroyed the elegant Hampstead flat to which, after selling the Chelsea house, he had removed. Finally, back in London for the last ghastly winter of the war, there was Birkinshaw's death. I asked Parsons about de Percy, the only one of the group not accounted for. Multiple sclerosis, he told me, and not long to go. He went himself two years later, I think of frustration.

I have never been in the Buckingham since.

I thought of all this on my way back from the beach, and as I did so the initial fantasy seemed more and more ridiculous. By the time Shlobber returned, an hour later, I had it all disposed of as hallucination, an effect of sleep and sun. But I noticed that he was back earlier than usual and that, instead of belting ravenously into his supper as was his wont following an afternoon with the boys, he turned away from it. He had a nervous and harrassed look, as though he expected the whippet to come yapping up behind him at any moment. When I went to read, he followed me. Seeking protection?

Putting down the book, I said: "Redehead." His ears pricked,

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and slowly went down again. He stared miserably at my shoe. "I know it all," I told him. "Not only who you are, but what happened. We should have guessed, of course, but it was the belles lettres thing that fooled us. Blumstein taking over even the field of your own pitiful activity. Did you find out about it before he died? Or did you discover the manuscript among his effects? How did he die, Redehead?"

The head came up briefly, brown eyes looked into my face from above the long muzzle, and then dropped. A very ordinary doggy action, one might say. Fortunately I had the house to myself.

"The point is that you found it and published it under your own name. That would have counted to Blumstein far more than a small thing like being murdered. You stole his great work, Redehead. And now that he's found you again, he is going to make you pay for it."

Shlobber got up and started to leave the room. He was a restless beast, not long happy in one spot, and normally I would have thought this characteristic. But I followed him to the kitchen, and stood over him.

"The biggest joke," I said, "is that it wasn't a good book after all. It was a silly pretentious footling book, and when people had got the we-stood-alone stars out of their eyes, they saw it for what it was. The most it can hope to achieve is a footnote in literary history, and a derisive one at that. Blumstein is still remembered as a good minor poet. Redehead goes down to posterity as the man who wrote the highbrow equivalent to "We're Going to Hang Out our Washing on the Siegfried Line."

Shlobber went out—miserably, I thought, but he often looked miserable. He was missing for a day and then I was telephoned by the Animal Shelter. He had been brought in dead, after being run over by a car that failed to stop. I asked them if they would bury him, and they agreed.

Had he run under the wheels of the car deliberately, I wondered, in despair? Or been chivvied under them by the vengeful whippet-Blumstein? Suicide, or murder? Or accident? He had, after all, about as much road sense as a rhinoceros.

The years went by, a little faster all the time, and Shlobber and my theories about him were pushed back into the unvisited departments of my mind and there collected dust. I have children growing up, and the past is less interesting just now than the present. But recently one of my daughters decided she wanted another budgerigar, and I went with her to the Bird Farm to buy it.

There were several gigantic outdoor aviaries, and the proprietor

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had a net on the end of a long stick, to catch the bird she chose. He knew his budgerigars well, and was generous and helpful with advice. When she settled on a mauve bird, he said:

"Just as you like, young lady. But that's a cock."

She nodded. "I know—from the wattle."

"A hen's best, for a bird by itself."

"But it's not to be by itself. I've already got a hen. I want to breed from them."

"Well," he said, "I wouldn't pick that one. You go up along to the next cage. There's some good 'uns there."

When she had left he said: "You know, it's a funny thing, you get some cocks that are useless for breeding. Not interested in hens at all. Spend their time with other cock birds." He grinned, shaking his head. "Queer, you might say."

I looked at the mauve bird. A kind of bulkiness to the set of the shoulders. De Percy? There were a group of them together up there in the corner of the aviary, amicably perched on a far-out twig of a barkless tree. A thin white one. Stenner? An emerald bird with a tatty ungroomed look, and a fat portentous creature in sage-green. Parsons? And Birkinshaw?

I looked for the two that were missing, but could not see them. Then there was a flash of colour across the aviary, a screeching of flight and pursuit—a small grey-blue pelting after a yellow with a bald patch on top.

"That's another thing," the proprietor said. "The way one bird can take against another, for no reason you can see. Those two, for instance. That blue one leads the yellow bird a dog's life."

At least they look prettier than they did.

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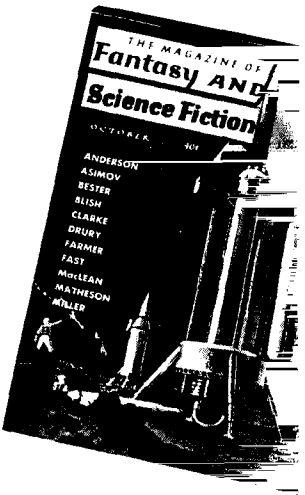


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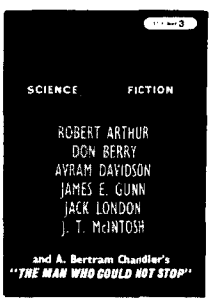


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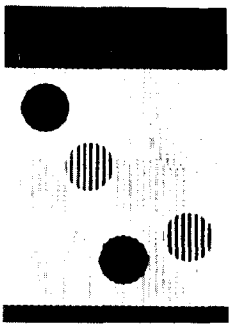

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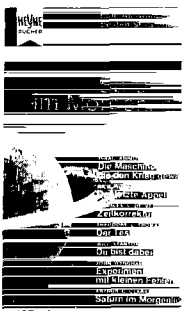

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